

CONTACT CHRISTMAS

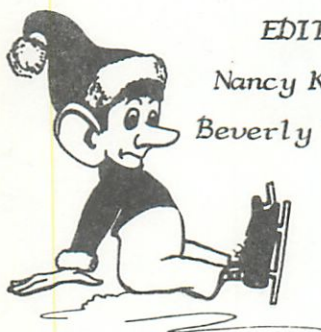


A CONTACT CHRISTMAS - 2

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EDITORS

Nancy Kippax
Beverly Volker



DEDICATION

To Russ & Terri and Steve & Renee
... they know why.

PRICE: \$14.00 in person



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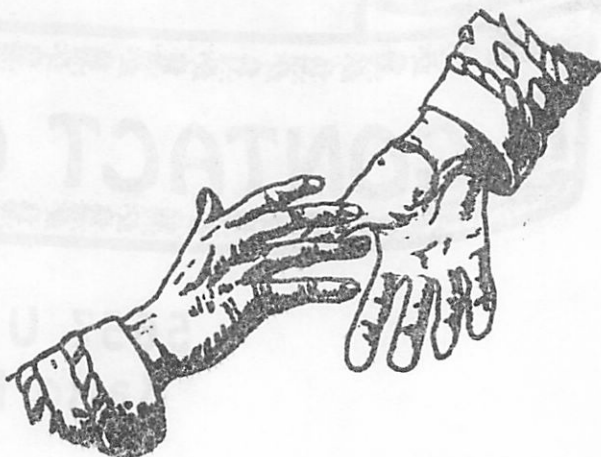
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AS THIS SEASON AGAIN

COMES UPON US
OUR MINDS CONJURE UP IMAGES,
EVER FAR BENEATH THE SURFACE --
TIMES PAST
AND SPECIAL
CHRISTMASES EVER
TREASURED:

CUT GLASS ETCHINGS OF
HOLIDAYS SHARED --
RICH AND FULL
IN THE
SPIRIT OF FRIENDSHIPS
THAT LIVE IN OUR
MEMORY -- A KEY TO
ALL THAT HAS
SURVIVED THE TEST OF TIME.





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EDITORS'

PAGES...

This time it's all Maggie's fault. Well, maybe not all. Gina is partly to blame, too. Her Christmas story, submitted to VOYAGES for a summer publication, seemed a little "season-warped." Add to that the fact that we had just received a great Christmas story -- just to read -- from Maggie Manlove, and there was an unpublished story Bev had written as a Christmas gift to friends a couple of years ago... Well, the idea was born. We had so much fun doing a CHRISTMAS CONTACT in 1979 (!!) that we thought we'd like to do it again. It would be a nice holiday treat, and our gift to our loyal readers -- our final publication -- just a little zine -- a few stories, some nice artwork, and our one and only color cover (we stopped publishing before they were in vogue). Everybody should be nostalgic at Christmas, so what the heck, we'd give it one more shot. You hold in your hands our "little" Christmas zine.

A few years ago we shelved CONTACT 9 forever because, after two years, we didn't have enough good material of the quality we felt we wanted to maintain for CONTACT. We hung up our blue pencils and press-type, packed away our layout materials, the assorted Selectric elements, and retired as co-editors of CONTACT. It was a nice life and we enjoyed going to conventions and not having to cart zines or sit behind a dealer's table. We launched into new areas of activity, mainly as part of the committee which produces ClipperCon.

Bev continued to write a little Trek, but Nancy packed away her notebook with her typewriter and announced she was burned out writing Kirk and Spock. That's understandable after ten years. When Bev agreed to edit VOYAGES for ClipperCon, Nancy couldn't be coaxed into contributing to the first issue, but by number two, with STAR TREK IV having given everyone a shot of adrenaline, Nancy pulled out the dusty notebook and came up with a new story.

It was about this time that the idea to do a special CHRISTMAS CONTACT was formed, and Nancy agreed to co-edit (actually she couldn't stand CONTACT being published without her -- and neither could her co-editor).

There were other people who couldn't stand the idea of CONTACT being published without them. If you received our flyer, you'll notice Martha's story isn't listed. She didn't think she could come up with one more Kirk-Spock Christmas story. Ha! (Or, rather, Ho-ho-ho!) Before long, she had given us a wonderful, warm, Martha Bonds submission in the true tradition of one of our favorite and most consistent contributors. Ginna LaCroix told us she might be able to write a vignette and, in fact, her first submission was about five pages. We suggested that she do a little expanding, and she agreed. And when we mentioned that we were short on poetry, Ginna joined the ranks of "poems-on-demand" by sending us four -- only three days later. Wonder if there was any inspiration in Wilkes-Barre, since the poems arrived the following week. Anyway, it would not be CONTACT without Martha or Ginna, and so they're here, and so it is.



Submissions began arriving. The word was given that we were doing one last special issue, and writers who had not had the opportunity to be included in previous CONTACTs were glad for the chance. We were warmed by the support and enthusiasm which poured in. Old friends wrote and sent in pre-orders. Our little zine grew and before long we had over two hundred pages of material. We had a limited theme -- it had to be Christmas. A limited cast -- of course, it had to be Kirk and Spock. No slash, no new characters -- just good old male relationship and hurt comfort. Add in an ample measure of sentimentalism, a pinch of humor (but not too much -- this is, after all, CONTACT), and you have the makings of this issue. Even the new writers -- Gina, Jan, Maggie and Mimi (a last minute submission) and Ellen (a truly unique story idea - oh, it's wonderful) and the more seasoned but new-to-CONTACT writers, Lynn & Laurel, Debbie -- all have the CONTACT "feel" to their stories. Marion conjured up a poem, and Suzanne turned a poem into a vignette after time and a pressing personal schedule prohibited the completion of the story we advertised by her. We hope to make you cry and laugh and feel good about the season and about our timeless Kirk and Spock. With the exception of the obvious plagerisms of Bev and Nancy's stories, all fiction are original and different. It's hard to believe Kirk and Spock could say Merry Christmas so many ways.

And the artists, too, have found so many ways to bring the stories to life. Each one has met the challenge and, we believe, come up with beautiful illustrations to complement the fiction. Just as some of the writers have been permanent fixtures since the early issues, loyalty stems, too, from artists. When approached, Merle enthusiastically responded with our full color cover. If it doesn't set the tone -- get you in the mood -- for the contents of the zine, you must be a Klingon -- or one of the next generation. A special thanks, here, goes to Gina Godwin, who also did a cover design. We regret we were unable to use it, but it had a small problem. It had the wrong title. Most of the other artists are new to CONTACT, but apparently not to its theme. They knew what we wanted and their artwork truly reflects the "feel" of CONTACT.

So now, having said all that, the one thing left to do is express our thanks to all the forementioned and our wishes for a Happy Holiday Season to them and you. We will appreciate and look forward to your comments, but not your S.A.S.E.s, please. We have no plans for any future publications and should we decide to reprint anything in the future, we will put notices in COMMUNICATIONS CONSOLE and other ad zines.

Putting this issue together has been fun, work, certainly a bit nostalgic, but most of all it has made us sick and tired of Christmas! So, Bah, Humbug -- to all a Good Night. Maybe next time we'll try Halloween... (Just kidding!!)

WE ARE ONE... WE REACH ,

Bev and Nancy

TRADITIONS

by
Jan Davies



art by **Maggie Manlove**

Spock marvelled at the artistry in the bottle. As far as he could tell, the dainty little ship was a perfect reproduction. With a flick of the switch, a holographic projection was enacted, and the ship was cresting on green waves tinged with silver foam. "Ingenious," he murmured.

"Jim would love it," said McCoy.

"No doubt," Spock agreed.

"Why don't you buy it for him?"

Spock looked thoughtful. "His birthday is several months from now... "

"Yeah, but Christmas is just around the corner. If I hadn't already bought him something... "

Spock's face seemed to close up as McCoy spoke. "I do not celebrate Christmas." His voice was firm as he placed the little bottle back on the shelf.

"But, Spock... " McCoy began to protest, "everybody celebrates Christmas. You don't have to be Christian, or even Human."

Something had turned off in Spock and McCoy's voice could not penetrate. He turned to leave the shop, ignoring the Doctor's protests.

As the shop's door slammed behind them, Spock addressed him with finality. "Dr. McCoy, I do not wish to discuss it further. I am not interested in your pagan Human traditions. I do not give Christmas presents, nor do I wish to receive them." As McCoy stared open-mouthed, Spock pulled out his communicator. "I believe I have wasted enough time on this Starbase. I can make better use of my time in the research lab."

As the doctor watched the stiff silhouette caught up in the transporter beam and faded from sight. He wondered briefly if it was the same companion with whom he had beamed down four hours earlier.

"I just can't understand it, Jim," McCoy recounted later as he and Kirk talked over coffee. "It was actually Spock's idea to beam down together. We were both off-duty today. He said he could use someone to guide him among the natives."

Kirk grinned. "Of course. He's only served with a predominantly Human crew for fifteen years. But I'm kind of surprised. You seem to be at each other's throats half the time."

"I know we bicker a lot, but we *do* like each other. At least I thought we did, before this afternoon. When I first met him, a few months ago, I thought he was a real cold fish, but once you get to know him... well, he sort of grows on you."

"I know what you mean," Kirk agreed. "I was a little afraid when I took command that we would never have more than a professional relationship. But I've really gotten to like him a lot. It's only been a few months, but I already feel like he's one of my closest friends."

"I know. That's why I suggested he buy you this present."

"Bones, he doesn't need to buy me a present."

"But he *wanted* to, Jim. I could tell he was looking at it and trying to think of an excuse for giving it to you. He seemed to regret that your birthday was so far away."

"And then you mentioned Christmas, huh?"

"Yeah. And he was like a different person. Cold. Abrupt. A stranger."

"I guess it's a religious thing. But it really shouldn't offend the Vulcan beliefs. I mean, I've served with Jews, Moslems, Confucians, Buddhists, and they always seem to get into the spirit of Christmas."

McCoy shook his head in bewilderment. "I don't know anything about Vulcan religion. I'm a doctor, not a chaplain. But if he's going to serve with a predominantly Terran crew, he shouldn't get all huffy about our traditions."

"Well, I don't want to force anything on him. But I'm afraid it's going to be pretty hard for him to ignore Christmas. I intend to go all out for the holidays."

McCoy's eyes widened. "Oh, really?"

"Yessir. Captain Garroway always lit up the Farragut like a Christmas tree, and I intend to do the same."

"I never knew you were so big on traditions, Jim."

Kirk's jaw set with a sense of purpose. "I'm the captain now, and I don't want anyone to feel left out during the season."

"So you're going to play Father Christmas? Quite a role for a mere mortal."

"I was hoping for a little help from my friends," he said meaningfully. "Those who have celebrated many more Christmases than me."

"Not that many more," McCoy glared, then softened. "Oh, well, just call me your 'right hand elf.' What do you want me to do?"

"I'm glad you asked," Kirk said, pulling a sheet of paper out of his desk drawer. "I'm not going to have a chance to beam down to Starbase 11, so I'd like you to see if you can locate some of these items for me."

McCoy scanned the sheet and whistled. "Jim, what is this, a gift list or a scavenger hunt?" He pocketed the paper. "Well, I'll do my best in the one day I have left for shore leave." He stood to leave. "I'd better turn in early. Looks like I'm going to be busy tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bones. Oh, by the way, what was it that Spock wanted to buy me?"

"Uh, I forgot."

"You forgot! Come on, Bones, it must have been pretty special if Spock wanted to buy it as much as you say he did." Kirk studied him suspiciously. "You didn't forget."

"No, I didn't. If you must know, I bought it."

"Aw, Bones..." A boyish smile lit up Kirk's face.

"I decided to put it away for your birthday."

"But that's months away!"

At this point, McCoy was almost at the door. "You'll just have to wait."

"But I'll die of curiosity if I have to wait that long! After all this talk about it..."

McCoy had reached the door, but Kirk was faster. He leaped to his desk and activated the door lock. "Just a hint, Bones. Then I'll let you go."

McCoy wagged an admonishing finger at him. "Now aren't you acting a mite childish for a starship captain? You unlock that door so I can look in on my patients and get a good night's rest, so I can get up nice and early to start on *your* shopping."

"Aw, Bones..." he sighed in defeat, then activated the switch. "G'night."



"Well, here comes Santa Claus." McCoy practically stumbled to the desk after Kirk had buzzed him in.

"Need another eighty pounds to do it."

"Shut up and help me with these packages."

Kirk eagerly began to go through the bags. "Oh, great, you got the popcorn!"

"I couldn't find any mistletoe or holly."

"That's okay. I'll put Sulu on it." He pulled out a softbound book. "The Joyous Songs of Christmas. Wonderful! Uhura's been talking about organizing a choir."

"So, by the way, where will she be performing?" McCoy asked hopefully. "Starbase 11? Wrigley's?"

At his friend's query, Kirk's face sobered. "I'm afraid the only place they're going to be caroling will be the corridors of the Enterprise. This afternoon I got our new orders."

"And?"

"Sector 19." Kirk's voice was grim. "In 14 days." Sector 19 was the area bordering the Romulan Neutral Zone, situated between galactic arms. The nearest Starbase would be days away by subspace radio. Kirk had known that eventually the Enterprise would be assigned the three month patrol. Not one of the prime assignments, but each starship had to serve its stint at the patrol.

McCoy understood immediately that the next two weeks were going to be extremely hectic. Any supplies they could possibly need had to be requisitioned, Class A checks done, and any repairs made. The ship had to be in optimum condition because it would take weeks to get any parts or servicing in that sector. "Well, this kind of shoots to hell any plans you had for celebrating."

"It's not going to make it easy. We'll only have time to stop at one Starbase. But I think it's more important than ever that we go on with our plans. The crew's going to need something to lighten the mood."

"Speaking of lights..." McCoy pulled a string of colored lights out of a package.

"Terrific."

Kirk finished unloading the packages. "I hope Scotty likes the Antarean whiskey. I've never tried it."

"He should, at eighteen credits a fifth."

Kirk frowned. "I still don't know what to get my Yeoman. Any suggestions?"

"Well, she likes jewelry."

"Cut it out, Bones. I don't want to lead her on. Something nice and... platonic."

McCoy looked dubious. "A platonic present?"

"Yeah. Like, what are you getting for Christine?"

"A Comprehensive Guide to Biochemical Reactions in Humanoids. It's a great reference."

"That's platonic, all right. I'll think of something, I suppose." He sighed as he surveyed the pile of presents. "You were definitely right about Spock's attitude toward Christmas. I tried to draw him out at lunch today and he got really cold and formal." He laughed in disbelief. "Do you know, he's got an experiment scheduled for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. He said he'd be too preoccupied to participate in any of the festivities, but that he hoped I'd enjoy myself. Damn it, Bones, his attitude just doesn't make any sense."

"Maybe he feels threatened by it. Like we're trying to drag him into some alien religion."

"People have been celebrating around this time of year since the beginning of history; the Romans with Saturnalia, the Persian Mithra, Scandinavians with their Yule logs. Even Hannukah predates the birth of Christ. It's like there's some racial need for Human beings to shine a light against the darkness." He gave an ironic laugh. "And it's sure going to be dark in Sector 19. The sparsest concentration of stars in the galaxy."

"But Spock isn't Human. His ancestors didn't have a Winter Solstice." McCoy was aware of the hybrid nature of his charge, but so perfect was Spock's Vulcan facade that he took for granted that the Human genes were minor, perhaps a result of experimental breeding. For all he knew, Spock had been started in a test tube.

"I know," Kirk sighed. Despite the oblique references to a 'Human ancestor' Spock had made over a chess game, the Vulcan exterior was so firmly fixed that the Captain, too, had overlooked his First Officer's Terran heritage. "But you know what's really frustrating? I already bought him a present and I'm just dying to give it to him."

McCoy folded his arms and looked at him. "I know the feeling. But he's a Vulcan, Jim. They don't believe in being happy."



The Vulcan language was not suitable for disagreements or heated discussions, so Sarek and Amanda used English for that purpose. As a consequence, Spock had learned the Terran tongue long before his parents suspected.

His first memory of the word 'Christmas' was that it was used in an argument.

"Amanda, I see no reason to celebrate this Earth holiday. This is Vulcan. Don't you Terrans have some saying, 'When in Rome...'"

She glared at him. "Don't start quoting homilies to me, Sarek. I'll live on your planet, I'll follow five paces behind you, but don't ask me to give up Christmas."

Sarek came over and sat beside her. He took her hand gently. "Amanda, we agreed that our son would be raised as a Vulcan. Genetically, he is predominantly Vulcan. If we expose him to more than one culture, he will be confused. We can't switch cultures with the change of seasons."

She demanded, "What about your Vulcan concept of IDIC? Isn't he supposed to learn that, too?"

"When he is older and has developed a firm foundation in the Vulcan beliefs, then we can introduce him to your cultural traditions. Your Christmas."

She sat for a moment, her forehead furrowed in silent thought. Finally she spoke. "Sarek, I think you can always win an argument with your logic. But it just doesn't FEEL right. Maybe your logic is faulty." She held up a hand to forestall him. "It could happen, you know, when it comes to your son. I want Spock to have stability too. But he's not a fullblooded Vulcan, and he's going to know that soon if he doesn't already. He's bright, he can see the differences in me. He sees my ears don't point, my eyebrows don't slant. If we ignore the differences now, he'll grow to think that they're something to be ashamed of, and that anything he inherits from me is a liability."

Now Sarek was bemused. "I would not wish him to be ashamed of his Terran ancestry. But he is still so young to be introduced to a religious observance. We do not begin the studies of religious philosophy until children are older. Couldn't it wait?"

"But, Sarek, Christmas is a holiday especially for children. We don't have to teach him the philosophy behind it yet. I just want him to get a feel for the Christmas spirit."

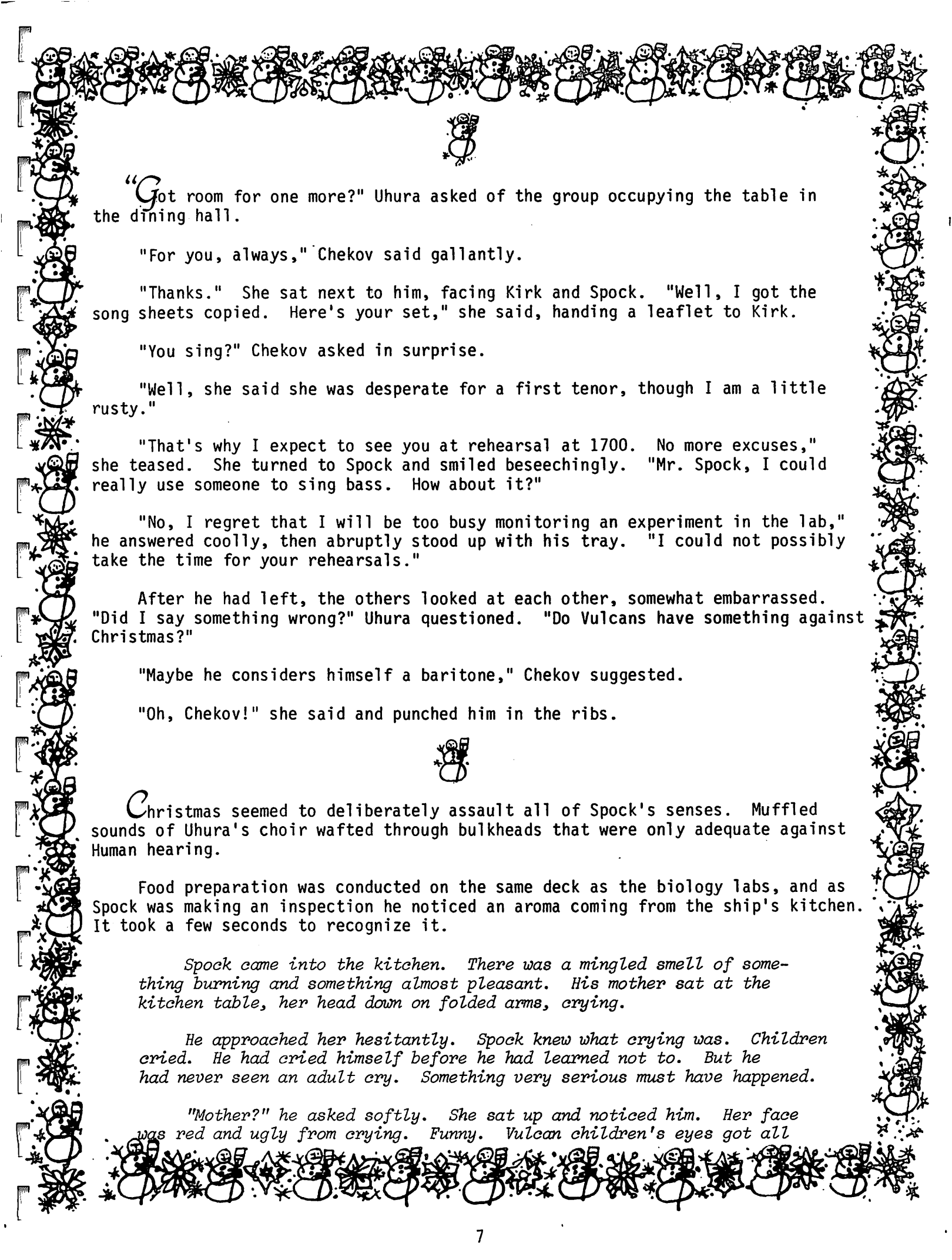
"The Christmas 'spirit'?"

She looked at him and laughed. "I can see that I'll have to teach you about the Christmas spirit, too."

Sarek spoke stiffly. "Wife, I am always interested in the acquisition of knowledge of another philosophical discipline."

She shook her head ruefully. "I can see I've got my work cut out for me."

Spock smiled to himself at the early memory. First hearing the word "Christmas" by his parents, he had thought it would be something serious. Possibly a medicine that would taste bad, or an inoculation that would sting. But before the fear had a chance to jell, Christmas had been transformed into a day of pleasurable sensations and good feelings, pretty colored lights, pleasant music, and the soft fur of a sehlat cub.



"Got room for one more?" Uhura asked of the group occupying the table in the dining hall.

"For you, always," Chekov said gallantly.

"Thanks." She sat next to him, facing Kirk and Spock. "Well, I got the song sheets copied. Here's your set," she said, handing a leaflet to Kirk.

"You sing?" Chekov asked in surprise.

"Well, she said she was desperate for a first tenor, though I am a little rusty."

"That's why I expect to see you at rehearsal at 1700. No more excuses," she teased. She turned to Spock and smiled beseechingly. "Mr. Spock, I could really use someone to sing bass. How about it?"

"No, I regret that I will be too busy monitoring an experiment in the lab," he answered coolly, then abruptly stood up with his tray. "I could not possibly take the time for your rehearsals."

After he had left, the others looked at each other, somewhat embarrassed. "Did I say something wrong?" Uhura questioned. "Do Vulcans have something against Christmas?"

"Maybe he considers himself a baritone," Chekov suggested.

"Oh, Chekov!" she said and punched him in the ribs.



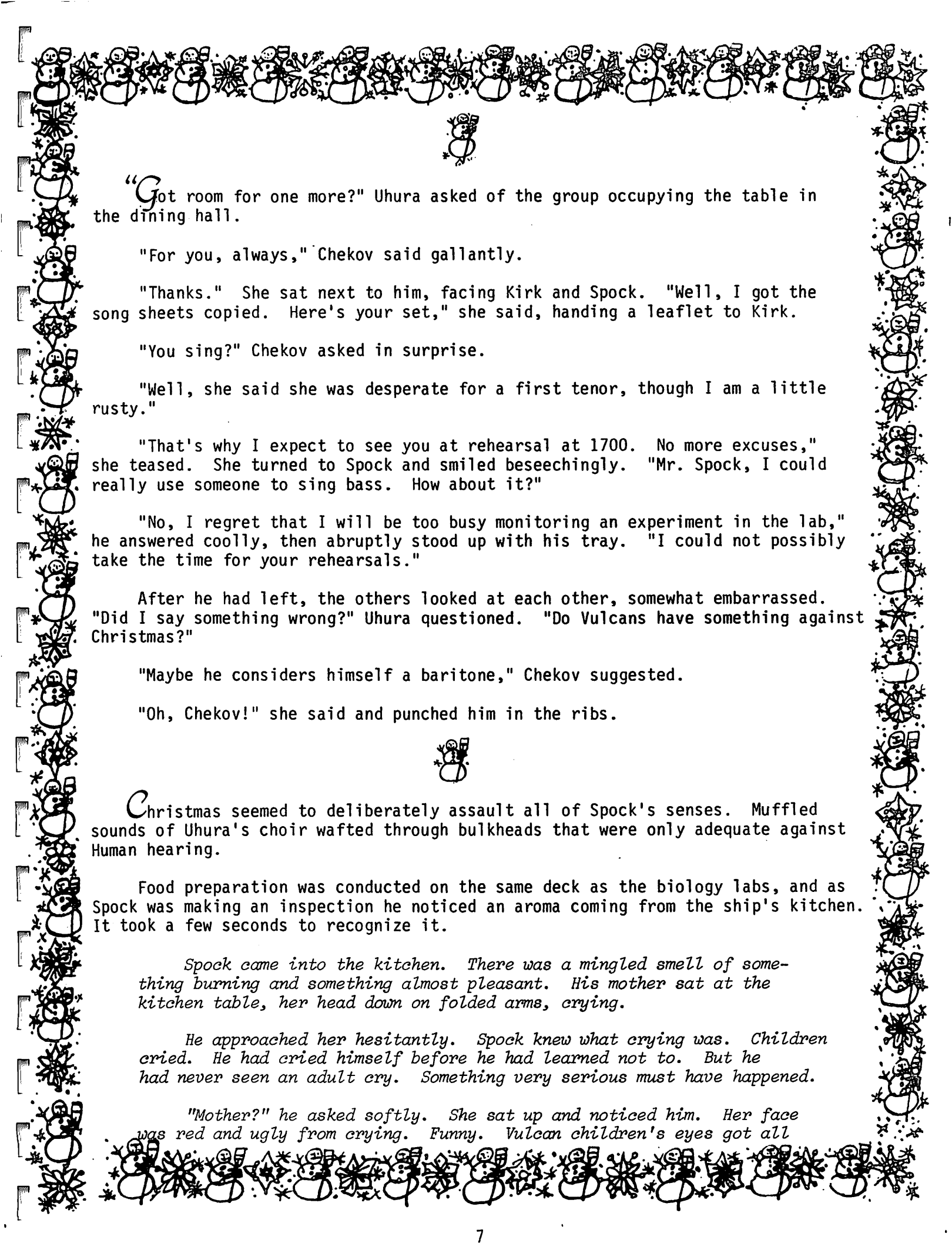
Christmas seemed to deliberately assault all of Spock's senses. Muffled sounds of Uhura's choir wafted through bulkheads that were only adequate against Human hearing.

Food preparation was conducted on the same deck as the biology labs, and as Spock was making an inspection he noticed an aroma coming from the ship's kitchen. It took a few seconds to recognize it.

Spock came into the kitchen. There was a mingled smell of something burning and something almost pleasant. His mother sat at the kitchen table, her head down on folded arms, crying.

He approached her hesitantly. Spock knew what crying was. Children cried. He had cried himself before he had learned not to. But he had never seen an adult cry. Something very serious must have happened.

"Mother?" he asked softly. She sat up and noticed him. Her face was red and ugly from crying. Funny. Vulcan children's eyes got all



green. Another difference. "What is wrong?"

His query started the tears anew. "Oh, Spock, I burned the cookies! I wanted to make them for you, gingerbread men like my mother used to make. They were so pretty. I wanted to give you my family traditions and have a Christmas dinner like we used to have at home, but I can't make a turkey, god-forbid, and I thought at least I could make you the gingerbread men. I had to special order the ingredients and then I go and burn them!"

Gingerbread men? Living creatures? Had mother accidentally injured or destroyed living creatures? Indeed, that was a reason to be unhappy. He asked cautiously, "Will they die?"

She stared at him, confused for a moment, then burst into laughter. Then she hugged him to her and somehow laughed and cried at the same time. "Oh, Spock, you silly, silly boy! They're not going to die, nothing's going to die. Cookies aren't alive, so they can't die."

After she wiped her eyes, she salvaged what she could of the dough and they made a batch together. Spock always enjoyed helping her and eating the cookies later.

The smell of gingerbread brought back the memory of the incident. In retrospect, he realized that his mother had seemed to be crying over something very insignificant, even by Human standards; in actuality the crying had been the culmination of weeks of frustration, trying to recreate the Christmas traditions she had remembered from her childhood. She had endured the difficulties of obtaining refined flour and sugar and of dealing with an ultrasonic oven that was never intended for baking cookies.

He had thought that the Captain's actions had seemed overzealous, especially with the added preparations needed for their new assignment. Suddenly Spock grasped why the holiday preparations were so important to Kirk. He is trying to do the same thing my mother did! He can't take these crewmen back to their families for Christmas, so he's trying to bring aboard every bit of Earth tradition he remembers.



"In my family's home, the tree was usually at least 7 feet tall."

Spock could not help overhear as he passed Rec Room 2.

"Yeah, Chekov, I know Russians and Texans always do things bigger, but this was the best I could do on short notice," Sulu answered good-naturedly. "Help me get it up on this table so it'll look taller."

Muffled sounds of exertion and then Chekov's voice, "It's a lot heavier than I thought."

"That's because it still has the root ball."

Spock stopped outside the doorway, inexorably drawn to the conversation inside. Where in space had Sulu obtained a tree? He observed the two men as they surveyed their project.

Chekov said begrudgingly, "Well, it is small, but it does have a nice shape."

"It's going to be beautiful once we get it decorated," Sulu assured him. "Anyways, sometimes small is better."

Spock did not find the tree to be small. Compared to the two foot Norfolk pine his mother had imported from Earth, the tree was enormous.

Without the two men noticing his presence, he left the room and headed back to his cabin. But he could not escape the memories of the Terran tree and the decorations in the Vulcan sitting room.

Spock played with the figurines under the tree as his father assembled the jars of enamel and brushes. "Can I help paint, Father?"

"You can start with the donkey." Pleased, Spock reached for a jar and brush.

Each Christmas, they set up the small nativity scene. Mother said the set had been in the Grayson family for more than ten generations. But this year, when she had taken out the box of Christmas ornaments and decorations, she had been dismayed at the way the paint had chipped and peeled. Sarek had volunteered to repaint the figures.

Spock watched as his father applied a coat of blue to Mary's robes. The much larger hands moved with a surety that Spock despaired of ever achieving.

Spock broached a subject that had been on his mind lately. "Father, I'm not certain I should be celebrating Christmas."

"Oh?" Sarek raised an eyebrow.

He began again. "This semester, Professor Sor has been teaching us metaphysical disciplines. I am beginning to wonder if Christmas is just for Terrans."

"You are half Human."

"Father," he reminded him patiently, "I am past the Kas Wan. I am Vulcan."

"I am also Vulcan. But the story of Christmas has some meaning to your mother. If I respect her intelligence and judgment, I must give her beliefs respect and consideration."

"I do not understand how the Terran beliefs and the Vulcan teachings can be true at the same time."

"Where there is truth, it can be reconciled with other truths."

"But I cannot reconcile these beliefs now."

"Then until you do, find what meaning you can in the symbols." Sarek held up a tiny doll - Jesus - to illustrate. "When a child is born, whether on Earth or Vulcan, he represents hope for all of his race, as a candle represents hope in the darkness. There is meaning enough in that hope to be cause for celebration."

It had taken hours to finish painting the set. Spock had never felt closer to his father.



Short of staying in one's cabin, it was impossible to escape Christmas on the Enterprise. With Captain Pike, Christmas had been a very low key affair. There had been services in the chapel and gift giving among very close friends, but not such an overwhelming movement.

The decorations were everywhere. Desks in the science labs were decorated with sprigs of holly, candy canes, and paperweights with snow scenes.

A Yeoman handing him a clipboard hummed, "Winter Wonderland" under her breath, but not so low that acute Vulcan hearing could ignore it. As he signed the roster, he resisted the impulse to question whether or not the bright red bow in her hair was non-regulation.

Spock reflected on the differences between the ship under Pike's command and under Kirk. The Enterprise was the same ship, but a Captain's personality somehow filtered down, even among crew members that had no direct contact with him.

Pike had been a good man, but there had always been an air of melancholy on his ship. Toward the end of the mission, it had developed into an aura of weariness, of homesickness, that had been dangerously close to developing into fear.

But this new Captain - how different. Kirk genuinely loved his position. Most of the crew was new - some personally picked by Kirk, though some had served with Pike. Nevertheless, each crew member felt lucky and proud to be a part of the Enterprise.

It was typical that feelings would be even stronger around Christmas when home was so important.

Christmas had been like that on Earth.

His first year at the Academy had given him a glimpse of what his mother had been trying to convey of "Christmas Spirit." Weeks before Christmas, the Terrans would decorate the very streets with colored lights. Santa Clauses would occupy a place of honor. Holiday music constantly played on the media. Bands played on each street corner. The air of suppressed excitement built until right before Christmas it practically sparkled in the air like static electricity.

He had left home a few months earlier against his father's wishes. Spock had been uncertain what kind of reception he would receive if he returned for a visit.

His classes had ended and would not start up for several weeks. Most of his classmates had returned to their respective homes for the holidays. The seasonal festivities decided Spock. Christmas had always been a time of closeness within his family - a tradition that no one else on Vulcan shared.

If he could ever reconcile with Sarek, Christmas would be the time to do it. Amanda would be pleased to see her only son. She had always made Christmas a special time.

He resolved that this year he would make it special for them. He purchased gifts for them both, taking delight in finding presents that were difficult to obtain on Vulcan.

The day before Christmas, he returned to ShiKarr, hoping to surprise his parents.

"Spock!" his mother opened the door. "I didn't know you were coming home!" He could read the spectrum of emotions that crossed her face with ease - surprise, happiness, nervousness. "Come in. So many packages!" She turned to the other room. "Sarek, Spock is home!"

His father was more skilled at concealing his emotions, and Spock could not immediately gauge how he felt about his "prodigal son." However, as his parents helped him to carry in his packages and luggage, he sensed unease from both of them.

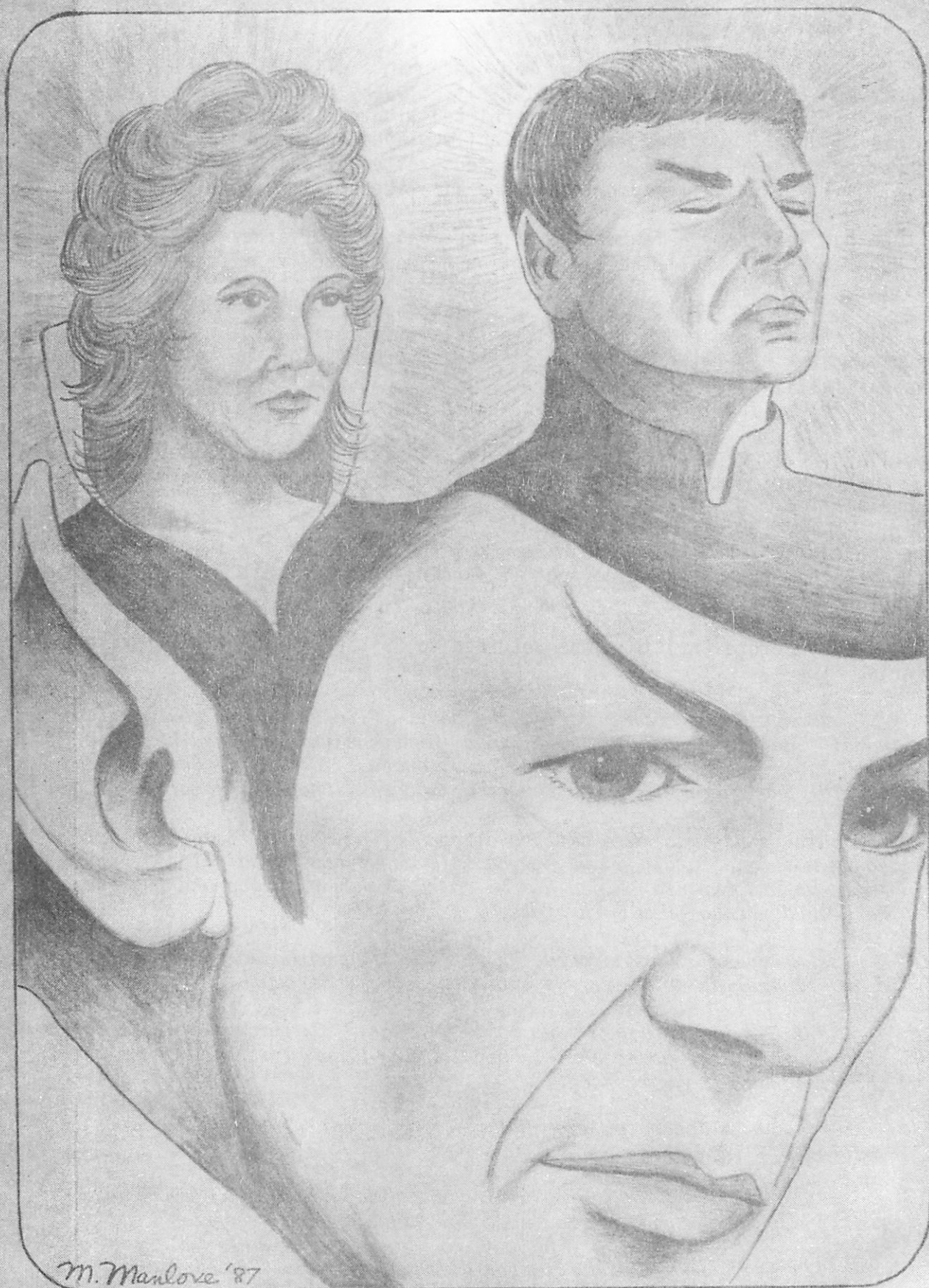
Feeling somewhat awkward, he put the wrapped boxes in the sitting room. There was no tree. No nativity scene underneath.

"We did not know you were coming, Spock," his father stated, making it an accusation, as he saw his son looking blankly at the corner where the tree had always resided.

"I didn't decorate... or get you any gifts..." Amanda's voice trailed off in apology.

"No matter," Spock said, hiding his disappointment. "This year I will supply the gifts. You need only supply your presence."

*"It seems that we cannot even do that, tonight," Sarek said.
"We have already accepted an invitation for dinner with Ambassador*



Williams of the Terran embassy."

Spock imagined the disapproval coming from his father in waves. What was unspoken but very clear was that they would not have made the commitment if they had known Spock would have been home. "But tomorrow..."

"A brunch at the Vulcan Science Academy. We are expected to attend as I am on the Board of Trustees. Of course, it would be inappropriate for you to attend after you have formally rejected the Academy." He referred to Spock's refusal of a scholarship to that institution.

"Sarek!" Amanda turned to her husband impatiently. "Of course Spock will go with us."

"No, Mother, I am somewhat fatigued from my trip. I would prefer to remain here."

"At least we will have Christmas night together." Her relief was not completely hidden. It would have been awkward to bring an uninvited guest. "Oh, dear, I've got to get dressed. We have to leave in less than an hour. Can I make you something to eat first?"

"I will fix my own dinner, Mother," he said wryly. "After 18 years, I think I can find my way around the kitchen."

The doubts he had had about coming home grew in the next few days. The disapproval Sarek had toward everything Spock said or did became more and more obvious.

Dinner the next evening was not the warm, family gathering Spock remembered from previous years. His father continually made pointed remarks that were meant to hurt concerning Spock's decision to join Starfleet. At one point, Sarek asked casually, "Have they taught you much about killing this semester, Spock? Or is that covered next term?"

There was an awkward pause.

The tension was tangible between the three of them. "I'll get desert," Amanda said quietly.

While she was out of the room, the two men did not speak. In the midst of dissention, they were totally in tune with each other's feelings. There was no way that they could reconcile. The hurt was too great. Sarek could not see Spock's decision to join Starfleet as anything but a total betrayal of the values by which he had been raised. Spock could not accept his father's disapproval as anything but a total rejection of himself as Sarek's son.

All that was possible was the appearance of civility for Amanda's sake, and that would be difficult to maintain for a prolonged period.

Spock decided to return to Earth the next day. Amanda sat on his bed as he packed. "It really isn't necessary to leave so soon, Spock. I'm sorry about yesterday, but don't let that spoil your whole visit. You still have ten days left."

"Mother, it is impossible. He cannot be in the same room without insulting me."

"I won't have it, Spock. This is your home and he can't drive you away."

He turned to her in sadness. The truth - that this was no longer his home - would hurt her too much. And if he allowed her to intercede with his father, she would be forced to take sides; the last thing he wanted was to cause a breach between his parents. "Please, understand, Mother, I must leave now."

"But you'll come back?"

"Perhaps next term, if I have the time." But not on Christmas, he vowed silently.

Twice he had returned to Vulcan. The strain between father and son had increased until they had decided that rather than argue, it would be more logical to cease speaking to each other.

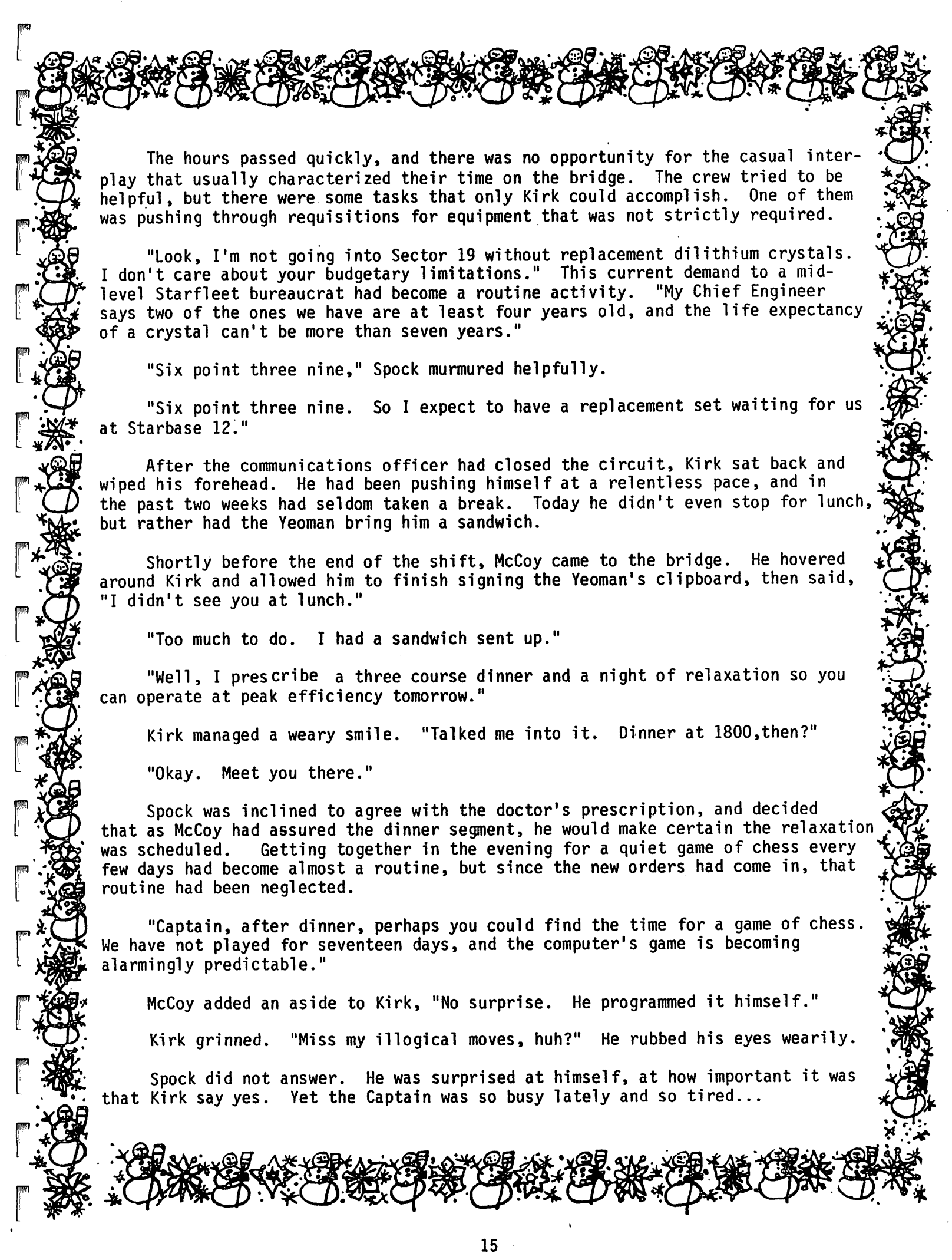
His second year at the Academy, the Terran celebration brought back the painful memory of that last Christmas on Vulcan. He had vowed to ignore the holiday ever since.



As Kirk entered the Bridge, Spock noted abstractly that he was seven point two-three minutes late for his shift. He did not bother to comment on that fact, as he relinquished the center seat and moved to the science station.

Other members of the bridge crew greeted the Captain with quiet smiles or nods. It was the Captain's prerogative to be late, and no one gave it a second thought. As usual, his presence added a certain rightness to the atmosphere of the bridge. He inquired into ship's status, and received the routine reports.

As the bridge crew returned to their respective activities, Kirk sank back into the command chair. Only Spock noticed the tiredness in his posture, the faint shadows under his eyes.



The hours passed quickly, and there was no opportunity for the casual interplay that usually characterized their time on the bridge. The crew tried to be helpful, but there were some tasks that only Kirk could accomplish. One of them was pushing through requisitions for equipment that was not strictly required.

"Look, I'm not going into Sector 19 without replacement dilithium crystals. I don't care about your budgetary limitations." This current demand to a mid-level Starfleet bureaucrat had become a routine activity. "My Chief Engineer says two of the ones we have are at least four years old, and the life expectancy of a crystal can't be more than seven years."

"Six point three nine," Spock murmured helpfully.

"Six point three nine. So I expect to have a replacement set waiting for us at Starbase 12."

After the communications officer had closed the circuit, Kirk sat back and wiped his forehead. He had been pushing himself at a relentless pace, and in the past two weeks had seldom taken a break. Today he didn't even stop for lunch, but rather had the Yeoman bring him a sandwich.

Shortly before the end of the shift, McCoy came to the bridge. He hovered around Kirk and allowed him to finish signing the Yeoman's clipboard, then said, "I didn't see you at lunch."

"Too much to do. I had a sandwich sent up."

"Well, I prescribe a three course dinner and a night of relaxation so you can operate at peak efficiency tomorrow."

Kirk managed a weary smile. "Talked me into it. Dinner at 1800, then?"

"Okay. Meet you there."

Spock was inclined to agree with the doctor's prescription, and decided that as McCoy had assured the dinner segment, he would make certain the relaxation was scheduled. Getting together in the evening for a quiet game of chess every few days had become almost a routine, but since the new orders had come in, that routine had been neglected.

"Captain, after dinner, perhaps you could find the time for a game of chess. We have not played for seventeen days, and the computer's game is becoming alarmingly predictable."

McCoy added an aside to Kirk, "No surprise. He programmed it himself."

Kirk grinned. "Miss my illogical moves, huh?" He rubbed his eyes wearily.

Spock did not answer. He was surprised at himself, at how important it was that Kirk say yes. Yet the Captain was so busy lately and so tired...

"Sure, why not. Can't let my game get too rusty. Come by my cabin at 2200."

Spock was slightly disappointed. Usually they would get together much earlier in the evening. They would probably have only an hour to play, barely time for one game. Still, an hour was better than none.



Instead of having the game set up, the desk was scattered with papers. Kirk looked up from writing as he buzzed Spock in.

"Oh, I didn't realize it was time yet. Let me just finish this one, then I'll clear away this mess and we can set up. Why don't you fix yourself something to drink."

Spock got the juice from the servo-slot, then came over to see what Kirk was doing.

Letters on command gold stationary. Stacks of envelopes already sealed. Kirk explained. "It's near the end of the year, and this seems like a pretty good time to tell the crew how much they're appreciated."

Spock noted the stylus. "You are writing each note personally?" he asked incredulously. "Four hundred and twenty-six separate messages?"

"Sure," Kirk said easily. "I've already done over half, and I still have almost a week." He looked at Spock earnestly. "Spock, by the time it's Christmas the ship will be smack in the middle of Sector 19 - the darkest, loneliest part of the galaxy. Nobody's going to be getting any mail from home." He placed the mail in his top desk drawer.

Spock smiled ironically. "Therefore, it is up to you to be 'home' for each and every crew member."

Kirk flushed faintly. "I am the Captain." He began to set up the chess set.

Spock came over and put his hand on Kirk's hand, stopping him. "It is unnecessary that you indulge me when you have so many things to do."

"No, please, Spock, I'm really in the mood for a game." He spoke enthusiastically. "It's been two weeks, and I *do* miss spending time with you."

Spock looked at the tired face that belied the forced energy in the voice. The man tried to be everything to everybody. With the additional preparations for their new mission, and his self-appointed task of being a father figure to the crew, he was still intent on maintaining their friendship, devoting time to it that he really couldn't afford.

Once Spock had stated his lack of interest in celebrating Christmas, Kirk had never tried to draw him into the preparations. Spock suspected that Kirk assumed his avoidance stemmed from religious differences. In truth, there was nothing about Christmas celebrations that was offensive to his Vulcan beliefs.

Spock considered that perhaps he should make an excuse to leave, allowing Kirk to have more time to write his notes. Yet a companionable hour with Kirk was an indulgence he did not want to give up.

Sarek and Amanda had been his family; though the blood ties could never be completely severed, their home was no longer his. Yet wasn't that what Kirk was trying to do, to make the ship a home for those away from their homes?

Suddenly, all of his inclinations against the holiday seemed unimportant. The hurt that had been created fourteen years ago seemed to melt into insignificance.

"Jim, you appear to be too tired to provide an adequate opponent. It would probably be best to continue some of your Christmas preparations that require less concentration." Before Kirk could protest, he added, "And I would be pleased to assist you in any way possible."

Kirk stared at him in surprise and the tiredness and dark shadows miraculously disappeared in a large grin. "You're offering to help me get ready for Christmas?"

Spock nodded briefly. A tightness in his chest made it difficult to speak. Did it really matter so much to Kirk that he share in this occasion?

"I guess you're right about me being a little weak on concentration. My brain feels like it's been in overdrive lately." Kirk went to his closet and looked inside. "Something that requires minimal concentration.... Ah, perfect."

He brought out a clear plastic container that appeared to be filled with yellow beads. "Popcorn."

"You wish to eat popcorn?" Well, Spock decided he would be agreeable to any Christmas tradition as long as it didn't require the consumption of animal flesh.

"That, too." Kirk headed for the door. He turned to Spock and said, "Come on!"



The microwave in Rec Room 2 processed the kernels quickly, and minutes later they carried bowls of fluffy white popped corn back to Kirk's cabin. Kirk sat his on the bureau and took a small sewing kit out of a drawer. "Now, my friend, I'm about to introduce you to the totally illogical activity of stringing popcorn."

"We are going to sew food?"

"Yes. An extremely time-consuming, mentally unstimulating activity."

"Indeed."

They seated themselves across from each other at Kirk's desk, with a bowl in between.



"So," Kirk began, as he tied a knot in the thread, "is there anything you still need in the labs?"

"My department's inventory is sufficient." Spock speared a kernel as he answered.

"Well, good. Although it's probably the only one that is."

They sewed companionably. As Kirk had indicated, Spock found it a totally unchallenging activity, an occupation for the hands, allowing for conversation. An excuse to spend an evening alone with Kirk was always welcome.

"Wesley's really giving me some flack about the force field modifications I requested. It's going to take eighteen hours to install."

"It is necessary. Romulan phasers are predicted to be 32.11% more efficient than those used five years ago."

"Hopefully, we won't have to test that out. But I'm not going within ten light years of a Bird of Prey without the best protection available!" With the vehement utterance, the needle slipped, pricking his finger. "Ouch!"

Spock hesitated in mid-stitch, waiting for an assessment of the injury, but Kirk continued the activity with hardly a pause. Spock expected the Captain would resume the discussion of preparations for their new assignment, but instead, Kirk took another direction.

"I'm really glad you changed your mind about the holidays. But I don't want you to violate any of the Vulcan teachings..."

"There is no conflict with Vulcan beliefs. My reasons for avoiding celebrations were personal."

"Oh."

Spock decided not to go into an explanation about those reasons. Now was not the time to burden Kirk with that controversy. It would seem like a cry for pity, and pity was the last thing he wanted. Perhaps, one day when they were closer, he could talk about his relationship with his family. And he had no doubt that they would soon be much closer.

"What changed your mind?"

Spock smiled to himself. "You did."

"Me? I hope that's good." Kirk was pleased. "Does that mean I can give you a present?"

"If you wish."

"Good! I've already got it wrapped in my closet." The Human's emotions were so tangible they seemed to radiate throughout the room. It never ceased to

amaze Spock that Kirk's happiness could hinge so much on his own attitudes.

"Look, mine must be two feet long." Kirk held up the string of popcorn.
"How long is yours?"

"I was not aware that we were in competition, Captain." Spock held his strand alongside Kirk's. It was a foot longer.

"We're not. I just wanted to see."

"Please satisfy my curiosity, Captain. Why are we sewing popcorn?"

Kirk grinned. "Didn't I say? When it's long enough, we can wrap it around the tree. My family always used to do it. It'll look like a chain of snowflakes."

"Fascinating," he murmured.

"I'd like to show you all of my family traditions. Our 'pagan rites' as you'll probably say." The teasing was good-natured. "If you can take the time away from that experiment you were going to be conducting."

"It appears that the necessary components cannot be synthesized by that time. The experiment will have to be delayed." For the first time in fourteen years, he felt that his presence on Christmas was important to somebody. There would still be time at Starbase 12 to send a Christmas greeting to his mother -- no, to his parents.

"You know, this chain has to be at least twelve feet long to go around the tree. At the rate we're going, we'll have to get together, oh, three or four more nights to finish."

"I would approximate at least four." Kirk looked pleased. Spock found the promise of four more evenings of this quiet companionship a more priceless gift than any Kirk could have stored in his closet.

The two men bent over their task. The chain of popcorn slowly grew.





EARTH CHILD

Beverly Volker

When I was just a little boy
I'd place the star atop the tree
And I knew someday the real ones
Would all belong to me.

When I was just a little boy
I'd hear how Santa flies
And I'd dream of giant Starships
And sailing through the skies.

When I was just a little boy
I'd want Christmas not to end
And thought someday I'd like to share
That feeling with a friend.

When you were just a little boy
'Neath Vulcan's crimson sky
Did Christmas come to your house?
Did Santa's reindeer fly?

When you were just a little boy
Did a Christmas star shine bright?
And did it bid you follow down
Its blazing trail of light?

When you were just a little boy
Did you trim a Vulcan tree?
And did you ever hope you'd have
A special friend, like me?





A STAR TO GUIDE ME

Lynn Syck & Laurel Ridener

art by C. Meidinger-Carter

The little desert planet circled its blazing sun, presenting an aura of tawny tranquility. Above, the mighty starship orbited, and aboard the Enterprise, a definite Christmas spirit permeated the atmosphere.

Sulu leaned back in his chair and looked over his shoulder at the Captain. "Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say, sir? I mean, being here at Bethlehem on the day before Christmas?"

"Bethlehem is not the planet's proper name, Lieutenant," Spock corrected before Kirk had a chance to answer. "And 'coincidence' has nothing to do with our presence here. This planet survey was scheduled seven standard months ago, human holidays notwithstanding."

Sulu grinned. "Like I said, coincidence."

Spock raised an eyebrow, prepared to explain the illogic of coincidence to the young lieutenant. Kirk intervened before his chance for a quick getaway was totally obliterated.

"Gentlemen, whatever the circumstances, we are here and I, for one, intend to enjoy it. The Governor has kindly extended shore leave privileges to the crew. I've promised to visit him and that's where I'm going now -- if there are no objections?"

Kirk turned to look at his First Officer who had turned his attention to the library computer.

"Would you care to accompany me, Mr. Spock?" He held his breath hoping that Spock would have more interesting things to do than accompany him on a social visit to an aging human governor. Having the Vulcan along would complicate his carefully laid plans.

One moment stretched into the next as Kirk waited for Spock to answer. The Vulcan turned, a hint of a frown on his face.

"I believe not, Captain. There appear to be unaccountable variations in the meteorological readings originating from the planet. I would prefer to continue my investigations, if that is acceptable to you."

Kirk nodded, guessing that Spock was relieved to have some legitimate business to keep him on board. Human holidays had always seemed a bit beyond the Vulcan's comprehension.

"Certainly," Kirk answered, heading for the lift. "You have the con. I'll be with the Governor, if you need me." Uhura, schedule shore leave parties for the crew. Warn them this is not a pleasure planet and they are to conduct themselves accordingly or they'll answer to me."

Uhura smiled, turned to her console and pulled the duty rosters before Kirk had finished speaking.

Kirk tugged at his tunic, smiled at his crew and said, "Merry Christmas to all," and just barely refrained from adding, 'and to all a good night.'



The Governor handed Kirk a steaming cup of a thick, murky liquid, laughing at the question on the Captain's face.

"It's a juice, made from the flowers of a local cactus. It has soothing qualities, much like the chamomile of Old Earth. I'm afraid it's an acquired taste."

Kirk took a cautious sip, then a second. "Not bad, Governor, not bad at all."

The gray-haired gentleman smiled, pleased at the compliment. "Now, won't you sit down and tell me what I can do for you?"

Kirk looked around the Governor's 'office'. The room was small and sparsely furnished, containing a plain wooden desk and two straight-backed chairs, one bare and one covered by a thick woven blanket. The governor took the bare chair behind the desk, indicating with a nod that Kirk should take the padded one.

"You were kind to let my crew take leave here, Governor. It's been too long for them, I'm afraid, and especially at this time of year. The Enterprise is home to most of us, but sometimes it gets to be a bit lonely."

Governor Talbon smiled, his lined face and blue eyes filled with kindness. "We are a simple people, Captain, as you know. We have chosen to live here as our ancestors did on Earth hundreds of years ago. Renouncing the modern 'conveniences' has enabled us to return to the very basic concepts of peace and brotherhood."

"It seems to be working quite well, Governor. Bethlehem has the reputation of being one of the quietest spots in the Federation."

Talbon nodded. "It is that, Captain, but we do enjoy our Christmas celebrations. I hope while you are here, you will avail yourself of the chance to see our pageant? It is a re-enactment of the Christmas story, a tradition with our people."

Kirk shifted uneasily in his seat. "Yes, I hope so, too," he replied vaguely, studying his cup. "There is one thing I would like to do while I'm here, Governor, with your permission."

Talbon's face was puzzled. "And what might that be, Captain?"

"I'd like to search for an 'Infant's Tear.' "

The Governor smiled indulgently. "I am not sure such a thing even exists. No one that I know of has ever seen one, but you certainly have my permission to begin your quest. Why would you want such a thing? "

Kirk returned his smile. "For a gift. For a friend who doesn't even believe in Christmas."

"He must be a very special friend, for you to go to such lengths to find the Tear."

Kirk stood and placed his cup on the Governor's desk. "He is that, indeed, sir. And more."

"Then, good luck, Captain." The old man's eyes sparkled with mischief. "It is said that only the brave and pure of heart can find the Infant's Tear -- and only on Christmas Eve. You have three hours left, so you had best be on your way." He put out his hand and Kirk took it.

"Merry Christmas, Governor." Kirk hurried out of the small office, a lantern and tricorder slung over his shoulder, and headed for the edge of town.



Bethlehem's tiny moon provided scant light, creating more shadows than it illuminated. Kirk was glad he had taken the precaution of bringing the lantern.

The vast expanse of sand stretched before him, empty and foreboding, and he shivered in the cool breeze that flowed around him. Within minutes, the small settlement was out of sight and the only sounds were those made by his feet against the hard-packed sand. Taking his bearings from the luminous dials of the tricorder he held, Kirk headed due north.

While he walked, the Captain occupied his mind with thoughts of how he had decided to make this quest. A chance remark in a report from the Ecology Section had mentioned the legend when describing the various flora and fauna they would find on Bethlehem. Fascinated, Kirk had done further research and found that the 'Infant's Tear' was supposedly a crimson bio-crystal that grew only in one certain place in the desert and only on one certain night of the year. An aura of mystery surrounded the legend, as it does most. It was said that when the Child beheld the beauty of His mother, a single tear fell from His eye. And forever after, on Christmas Eve, beneath the sacred light of the Christmas star, a single crimson flower would grow, honoring the glory of His mother.

Kirk searched the sky and found only the usual, distant twinkling constellations. What stars did decorate the sky were too distant and faint for any to be called a Christmas Star.

"Well," Kirk muttered, "so much for legends."

Chances were that it was only a fable after all, but it was the off-chance that there might be some truth to it that had drawn him here. He could imagine Spock's face when he presented it to him in the morning. It was the only present he could think of that was suitable for a Vulcan scientist who did not believe in Christmas. The crystal represented the heart and soul of goodness. A fitting gift for Spock, indeed.

Lost in his thoughts, Kirk was surprised at how much distance he had covered. All points of reference were suddenly gone and he consulted the tricorder again. The oasis with its outcropping of rock lay just ahead, a dark jagged outline against the distant horizon. The wind blew harder and he wished he had thought to dress more warmly. It didn't really matter -- within a few minutes he would

either have what he came for or be on his way back to the settlement, trying to come up with another idea for a gift for Spock.

The sound of distant water splashing reached him through the silent desert night, a companionable sound that somehow filled the emptiness surrounding him. Another twenty minutes of steady walking brought him to the oasis. He stared in wonder at the beauty before him. Water tumbled forty feet down the steep pile of boulders and into a deep pond at his feet. A carpet of florescent blue moss covered the area around the water and within the small oasis, time seemed to slow to a standstill. A sense of expectancy charged the atmosphere and it was through sheer will that Kirk finally forced himself to move.

Activating the lantern, he searched for some sign of the crystal. But the rocks were barren and dark, empty of any life, save the tenacious moss. He climbed the lower rocks, shining the light ahead of him, illuminating cracks and crevices while he kept a precarious hold with one hand.

His search took him higher and higher up the face of the boulders. Disappointment grew in him as he scrambled for impossible handholds, finally reaching the pinnacle of the tallest rock.

And found nothing.

He stopped, trying to catch his breath, disappointment bitter in his mouth. It had been only a legend after all. Why was he surprised? He wondered if he had really expected to find the darn thing.

His breathing finally returned to an acceptable rate and, ready to go home, he looked around, trying to find the easiest way to get down. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a crimson glow. Nestled in a crevice just an arm's length away was the Infant's Tear.

Kirk studied the rocks beneath his feet, ignoring the dizzying height, needing just that single hold more to reach the delicate crystal. But in order to retrieve it, he would need both hands free. Turning off the lantern, he maneuvered the strap over his shoulder and began working his way toward the crystal.

Loose bits of rock fell away, clattering down to land with soft, mossy thuds at the bottom. More than once he slipped, almost falling, and it took twenty minutes and three dangerous lateral movements before he actually had the crystal within his grasp.

Kirk held it with great care. The crystal glowed in his hand, seemingly alive, pulsing with an inner power and warmth of its own. He was drawn to it, mesmerized by it, for a moment almost forgetting his precarious position. Shaking his head, he began the tricky descent, suddenly realizing just how high he had actually climbed.

"Idiot," Kirk muttered, taking deep breaths to calm his pounding heart. He was not exactly certain how he had managed to climb that high, and he was not certain how he was going to get back down, other than carefully -- very, very carefully.

Gravity tugged at his weight, making each hold a little more difficult than the last. The wind blew harder, bits of sand stinging his face and hands, stinging



C. Meidinger - Carter

his face and hands, stinging his eyes. His feet slipped more than once and he had to keep his face turned toward the rocks. He lost track of how far down he had climbed, but thought he could not be more than twenty feet above ground.

Then the full screaming violence of the sandstorm hit, ripping at him with a force he would not have believed possible. He lost his tenuous hold, slamming into jagged outcroppings as he fell. Ribs caved in when he glanced off the rocks at the base of the boulders and red blood dripped on the blue moss of an alien world. As he lost consciousness, his last thoughts were of the crystal, and Spock.



Spock's head swam. Crimson-coated darkness threatened to engulf him and he clutched the console for support.

He shivered, forcing the image aside, focusing his attention on the readings from the planet below. Erratic, they had appeared again, indicating a change in the planet's surface. He felt a sense of danger which threatened Kirk somehow. But there should be nothing on Bethlehem which could harm him.

He turned to Uhura. "Lieutenant, please try to contact the Captain."

Uhura placed a call to the governor's office. After a moment, she pulled the listening piece free and turned to the First Officer. "Governor Talbon reports that the Captain went into the desert, Mr. Spock -- alone."

The words brought back the sense of danger full force. Immediately, the Vulcan stepped down to his library computer and activated the ship's sensors. Inoperative. Some element in the desert sands, stirred up by the storm, had rendered them useless. He wanted to slam his hands into the delicate circuitry, but dared not.

Exercising every Vulcan discipline at his command, Spock drained his voice of all emotion. "Uhura, notify Mr. Scott he is in command. Have Doctor McCoy prepare for medical emergency. Ship's sensors cannot locate the Captain."

But I can, he finished silently, as he entered the lift. *I must.*



Kirk awoke hard, scrambling to consciousness as the last vestiges of self-preservation took control. He choked and coughed, clearing his throat of the dust and grit that nearly strangled him. Had he remained unconscious any longer, the sand would have buried him. As it was, only his face and right arm remained free. It was imperative that he free himself and find some sort of shelter before the howling storm covered him completely.

The sand pulled at him, not wanting to let him go and he felt the first stirrings of real panic. He moved to free his left arm, but even that small action brought a grinding agony of such intensity that he nearly passed out again. He froze, until the throbbing pain backed off enough to allow him coherent thought. Kirk forced himself to think calmly, to assess the damage to his own body. Broken ribs, certainly, and probably internal injuries as well. The metallic taste of blood was unmistakable. If he moved, he knew

he could puncture a lung and set off more hemorrhaging. If he did not move, the sand would bury him and he would indeed suffocate.

He had no choice -- he had to move.

It seemed to take hours to crawl the few feet to safety, to work his way into a shallow crevice that was his only shelter. The storm continued unabated and he knew that time was running out. His communicator had been lost in the fall, and his lantern and tricorder were buried under several feet of constantly shifting sand. No one except the governor knew where he was and the governor would not suspect trouble until dawn -- no one would be looking for him. He would have to make his own miracles, somehow, and find his way back to the settlement.

He shivered, unsure whether it was from the cold or the fear. He wondered if he would find his miracle in time. Opening his hand, he tried to use the crystal to focus his mind, a technique Spock had attempted to teach him on more than one occasion. It was a great deal to ask of such a small thing, but it was all he had.



The storm raged on outside the tiny windows of the Governor's office. It was no match for the storm that raged within Spock. Logic told him that he could not begin his search for the Captain until the storm was over and the Enterprise instruments were functional. His heart told him to leave *now*, to push his way through the curtains of blowing sand and find Kirk before it was too late. The desire to leave immediately was a palpable force, pulling at his heart and soul.

He became aware of bells ringing and voices raised in joyful song, heard easily above the moaning storm. The Governor spoke behind him. "It's Christmas, Mr. Spock. The people have gathered in the Great Hall to celebrate."

Spock turned to look at the old man. "Please go to your people, sir. There is nothing you can do here."

Talbon seemed uncertain and smiled tentatively. "I really should be with them." He turned to leave, then stopped. "Your Captain will be all right, Mr. Spock. After all, it *is* Christmas."

A seldom experienced feeling of bitterness engulfed Spock. Talbon had told him why Kirk had gone into the desert alone. It was because of Christmas that his Captain was lost, perhaps dying.

"Yes, Governor, it is," he managed before returning to his vigil.



Kirk awoke with a start. He had fallen asleep, or fainted, and was not certain how much time had passed. The storm was almost over, the last of the sand whispering to the desert floor. He struggled to a half-sitting position using the rocks behind him for leverage, biting back a cry of pain. Then he looked up. The moon had set during the storm and there was nothing but thick, heavy blackness overhead. There were no stars to guide him now, no way home.

Fear, colder than the wind off the desert, surged through him and he sank back down against the rocks. Clouds blown in by the storm obscured the stars and with no tricorder, he was without direction. Once beyond the oasis, he would be hopelessly lost in the black desert night.

Opening his hand, he tried to see the crystal, but there was only a soft, shimmering glow. He wanted to remember how he had first seen it, what it had looked like, each facet lit by the overhead moon. It was probably the last gift he would ever give Spock. It mattered a great deal to him that he had managed to save it....



Spock stepped outside the small building and studied the dark sky as he shrugged on his survival pack. Once again he attempted to get readings with his tricorder and once again the instrument proved worthless.

The communicators as well were not working. Though there had been numerous volunteers to form search parties, he would not send them blindly into the desert with no instruments to guide them. McCoy had been especially hard to convince.

"Jim may be hurt as well as lost, Spock. I'm going with you," the doctor had protested.

"Doctor, you will only hinder my attempt if you accompany me. I can travel faster alone. You will best help the Captain by being prepared to treat him here."

McCoy had turned to leave the transporter room when he stopped and whirled around. "Wait a minute, you can't find him without instruments, either."

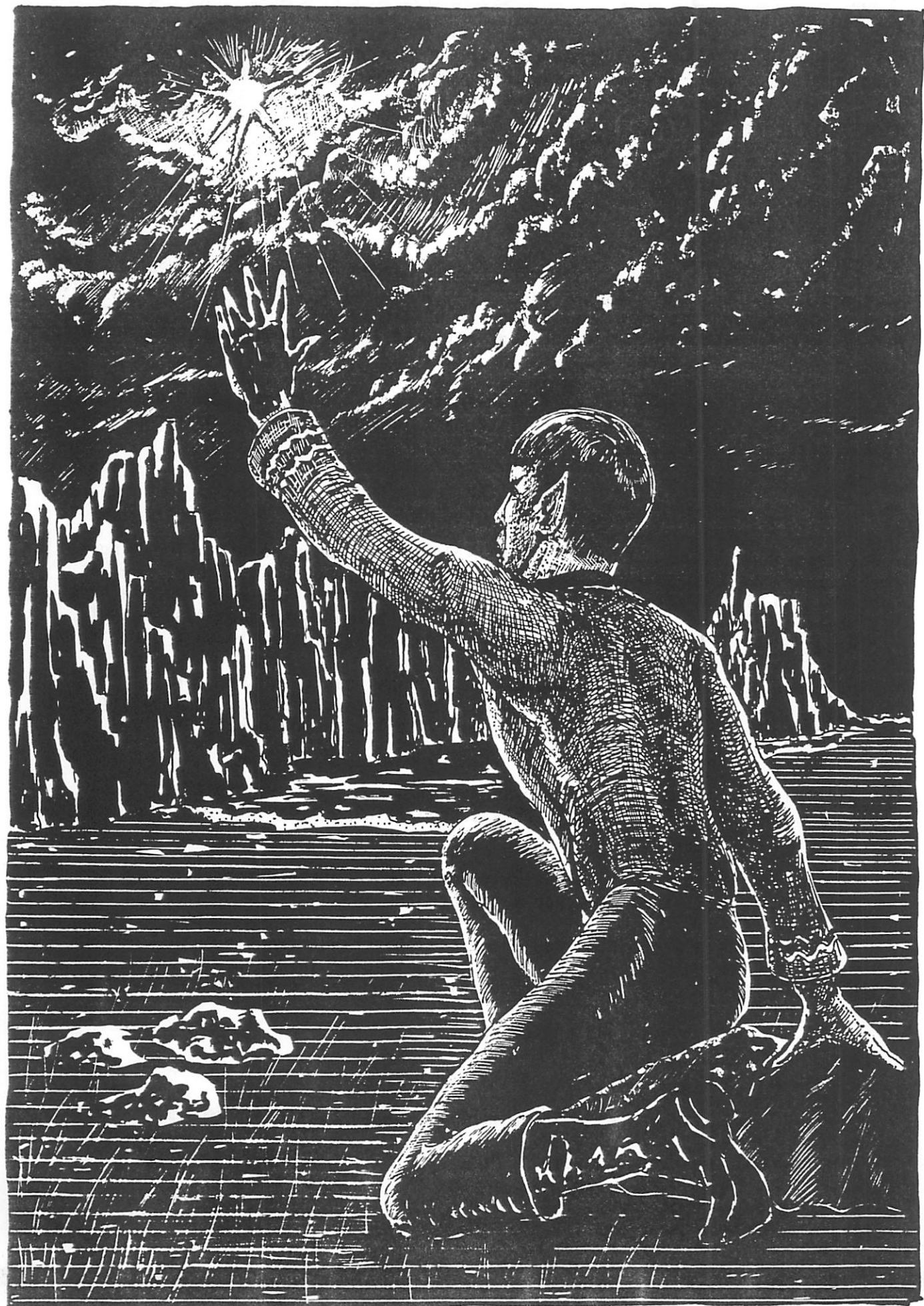
Spock did not respond, but stepped up onto the transporter platform. As he nodded to the operator to commence, he regarded McCoy without a trace of emotion. "You have your orders, Doctor."

Now he stood in the middle of a desert storm with nothing but his own abilities to locate his Captain. He breathed in the cold air and cleared his mind. More than once, some subliminal link with Kirk had led him like a homing beacon to find his human friend. He closed his eyes and mind-searched.

There was pain. A cacophony of pain. Kirk's pain. And a pulling away from it, a desire to be free of an all-consuming agony.

Kirk was dying. Somewhere on the desert floor, alone and in great anguish, he was dying.

"No!" the Vulcan whispered. He started forward, using the pain to show him the way. Then it faded into a weeping mist and he knew Kirk had lost consciousness. Fear clawed at him and he started into the desert once more, unmindful of direction, only knowing with complete certainty that he could not remain where he was. After just a few long strides, he stopped and sank to the sand, head bent and fists clenched at his sides. Anguish claimed him. He could go no further; there was nothing to guide him now, not even the pain.



C. Mardinger - Carter

Spock raised a fist to the dark sky, wanting to damn whatever fates had taken all of life from him. Then, through a break in the tumultuous clouds that still filled the sky, he saw the star. Brighter by far than any other star in the heavens, it stood as his solitary beacon in the cold desert night. He never considered questioning its presence. Jim had always believed in his stars... and he had always believed in Jim.



With each passing moment, Kirk found it harder and harder to breathe, each desperate gasp shorter than the last. His sides burned, blood filled his mouth and trickled down his chin. It seemed so unfair to die like this. Death had always been a constant companion. But not like this, alone, away from his ship, away from Spock, on Christmas.

He let the thoughts of the Vulcan soothe him. He turned his mind to memories of their life together, and somehow the pain lessened. He was comforted, and he was not alone.



Spock hurried as fast as the fresh-blown sand would permit. The single brilliant star seemed to move with him, always staying ahead of him. He was not certain why he still followed it but it represented the only hope he had. In his mind, he was again aware of Kirk and he tried to project his thoughts to him, to tell him that he was coming, to hold on, please, to wait for him.

Suddenly, closer than he would have thought possible, the rocks of the oasis loomed. Spock pulled the lantern free of its packstraps, activating the torch as he broke into a slipping run, the loose sand making any real speed impossible.

"Jim!" he called, his heart pounding wildly. There was no answer, and only the continued presence of Kirk's echoed pain in his mind reassured him he was not too late.

Once inside the rocks, he quickly found the Captain, propped up against the jagged stones. Spock reached a hand to the human's face.

"Jim?" His heart contracted as he saw the bright red blood that soaked the front of the gold tunic and continued to trickle in a steady stream from the corner of his mouth. He had found Kirk, and now feared he was too late.

The Captain stirred and opened pain-filled eyes.

"Spock? Are you...really...here?" he gasped.

"Yes, Jim. I am here." Spock gently brushed back the sweat-matted hair.

"Then we...we can go...home?"

Spock pulled his communicator from his belt and opened it. Now that the storm had abated, there was the possibility that he could reach the ship.

"Spock to Enterprise. Spock to Enterprise, come in."

There was no reply, only static that scraped along Spock's nerves like fingernails on a blackboard. There was to be no help from that quarter.

The Vulcan swallowed hard. If he moved Kirk now, he would surely die. And he would just as surely die if he remained where he was. There was no escape, this time, no refuge from the death that stalked them both -- but he would try.

Spock closed the communicator and replaced it on his belt.

Kirk closed his eyes and whispered, "The storm...we can't contact the ship." It was not a question. It was a death sentence and they both knew it.

But Spock would not give up so easily.

"We are not far from the settlement, Jim, I will carry you."

Kirk allowed a small feeling of hope to stir within him. Spock's strength and instincts had rescued him on more than one occasion.

Spock prepared to lift the dying human into his arms. Looking up, he sought direction.

The star was gone.

The black empty sky swelled over him, mocking the brilliance that had been there moments before. He looked down and saw that Kirk's gaze had followed his own. And he saw the lost, empty look of hope destroyed.

Spock dropped to his knees beside his friend, unable to speak, his mind a maelstrom of denial. With no star to guide him, instruments inoperable and Kirk bleeding to death, they were helpless. It was still hours until dawn, hours before they dare attempt to cross the desert. By dawn, the Captain would be dead.

Kirk leaned his head back against the rocks and reached out a hand to grasp Spock's arm. "It's...all right...Spock. You did...all you could. At least...you're here...I'm not alone."

"Jim -- "

Kirk struggled on, the flow of blood increasing with each ragged breath. "I wanted to give you...something special...for Christmas." He opened his right hand and held it up to Spock. It was empty. All that remained was a soft, crimson glow where the crystal had been. He looked at Spock, tears in his eyes. "I must have...held it too...tightly... It was so beautiful, Spock, so delicate... legend says...heart and soul...goodness..."

Spock reached out and grasped Kirk's hand. "You have given me all that is good in yourself. No crystal could be as beautiful as what I have seen in *your* heart and soul. I could ask for no greater gift."

Kirk's lips trembled, a tiny smile, and his eyes drifted closed. Again, Spock felt him slipping, pulling away from the agony. Hot tears burned his eyes.

Jim must suffer no more.

With infinite tenderness, the Vulcan placed his fingers on the side of the Captain's face and took the pain into himself. If Jim must die, and this time Spock feared he must, he would make that passing as gentle as possible.

Knowing he could no longer cause him pain, Spock reached for him and took him gently into his arms, holding him close.

Kirk nestled against the strong shoulder, drawing comfort and warmth from the desert fires of his Vulcan friend. He took a single tearing breath, fighting the fresh well of blood that threatened to drown him. Safe within these arms, he prepared to die.

"Spock," he whispered, "I...never...told you..."

In the still desert air, Spock imagined he could hear the distant bells and the high sweet voices singing songs of joy and love and peace. In his final moments, Kirk had given him more peace and love than he had ever known. It was indeed Christmas, and there was only one gift he could give Kirk now. He would accompany him on this final journey, stand with him in death as he had in life, making certain the Captain would never be alone again. His hand reached for the meld, making the contact easily, content to spend eternity with his Captain. Some would have said too soon, for the Vulcan, but he knew otherwise.

He began the ancient chant, words of Love and Life, Time and Eternity. That which could never be, was and that which was would be forever. The Vulcan released his hold on this side of life and reached for his Captain.

Kirk's soul waited at the edge of Forever, a solitary star pulsing in the unending universe of darkness. The two souls drew together, two exploding suns blending, merging, becoming a single new star lighting the endless night. Only the years of command training and absolute obedience to duty allowed the insistent, pleading chirp of the communicator to penetrate the final stages of the meld.

A shimmering hope filled them both as their minds slowly slipped apart.

Spock sent one final thought along the link, a link that would last forever.
'And I love thee, T'hy'la.'



Hours later, in Sickbay, Spock stood watching Kirk, marveling at how the simple act of breath being taken in and expelled could have the power to cause him such joy.

He heard McCoy come up behind him and they both stood silently for a time, simply watching.

"He's going to be all right, Spock," McCoy ventured.

"Yes, Doctor, I know."

McCoy reached out and straightened the already straight covers. "We nearly lost him this time, Spock. A few minutes longer and he would have bled to death."

McCoy waited a moment for the Vulcan's answer, watching him out of the corner of his eye. McCoy understood full well what the Vulcan was feeling, whether or not the stoic First Officer would ever admit it.

"You know, Spock, some humans believe that Christmas is a time for miracles."

The Vulcan turned to look at the doctor. "Vulcans do not believe in miracles."

"Yeah? Well then, how do you explain that star that led you to Jim? There isn't any star, Spock, not like that, not around here." He stood, arms folded across his chest, chin lifted to that no-nonsense level, daring Spock to have a logical answer.

Spock thought of the star, the mercurial brilliance -- the star that had appeared especially for Jim.

"It was the Enterprise," Spock said softly, reverently.

"The Enterpri--" McCoy sputtered, all his defiance disappearing. "I don't understand, Spock. How cou--"

Spock took a deep breath, shaking off the feeling that something magical and mystical had happened, something far beyond his Vulcan logic. "The Enterprise reflecting this planet's sun, visible only after the storm had abated. Nothing more." And certainly nothing less.

A perfectly logical explanation.

McCoy wasn't buying a word of it. "Well, what about Scotty suddenly being able to use the ship's sensors? How do you explain that?"

Spock laced his fingers behind his back, taking on an air of long-suffering patience, and cocked a single, condescending eyebrow. "After the storm had ceased, the atmosphere cleared of whatever element had caused the initial difficulties -- the sensors became operable. Nothing mysterious or unexplainable."

McCoy threw up his hands. "I give up, Spock. There's no way you're going to admit that this time - *this time* - something besides your 'logic' bailed out you two."

Spock lifted the other eyebrow.

"You just won't believe in the miracle of Christmas, will you?" the doctor challenged.

The Vulcan refused to answer and McCoy turned, stalking to the door. Spock resumed his vigil over Kirk.

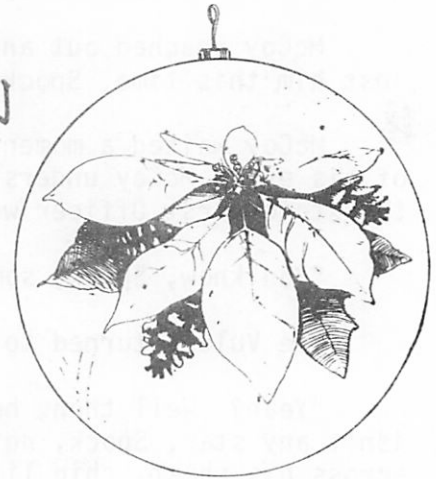
McCoy's soft words reached him. "You don't fool anybody," he said, wrapping the Vulcan in warmth and love. "Merry Christmas, Mister Spock."

Spock reached out and laid his hand on Kirk's brow. "And God bless us every one, Doctor..."

SONG of the SEASON



by Suzanne Elmore



TIMES' PASSAGE, HOURS OR LIGHT YEARS
DOES NOT RESTRAIN
THE SENSE OF WARMTH, HOME AND FAMILY
CONTAINED
IN MELODIC TRIBUTES TO THIS SEASON
THAT STIR OUR SENTIMENT BEYOND REASON.

GALAXIES, GOVERNMENTS, LIMITS OF LANGUAGE
DO NOT IMPEDE
THE MESSAGE OF BROTHERHOOD
TO ALL SPECIES.
HOPE ABIDES, KINDNESS REMAINS
THE DREAM OF UNITY CAN YET BE OBTAINED.

jse

Kirk put down the Christmas greeting with a verse by a poet previously unknown to him. He leaned back in his chair and looked across his desk at the small rack of old fashioned greeting cards on display. He valued them as part of his antique collection, but during this season, he treasured them for the sentiment they imbued.

The ship's intercommunication system was broadcasting "seasonal" music, from ancient chants, and traditional caroles to recently composed pieces of work. A selection titled "God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" was playing. Kirk relaxed, and began to hum the old melody. A smile appeared as thoughts of home swept through him.

No matter what their location or assignment, at this time of the old calendar year he felt that sweet longing to be with family.

The ache of nostalgia lay deep inside, as past Christmas holidays drew to mind. In the background a soft melancholy tune echoed. The recollections of Sam brought a tightness to his throat. His eyes began to burn. Slowly the kaleidoscope of memories turned and began to encompass Spock. Perhaps it was an unconscious effort to remind himself the cycle had continued, he was not alone.

His thoughts dwelled on Spock, still on duty on the bridge. His ship's First Officer always assumed extra duty hours during this season, allowing fellow crewmembers more preparation time for holiday ceremonies and celebrations. Spock's consideration of others was seldom mentioned, but silently noted and deeply appreciated aboard ship.

Kirk felt a warmth flow through him as he glanced across the room at his gift for Spock. The smile returned to his lips in anticipation of his friend's reaction to the present. Suddenly he was anxious for time to pass, so they might share a quiet celebration together.

One of his favorite Christmas melodies began its slow, sweet strains. Thoughts of his childhood resurfaced and emotions awakened that he normally held under control as a Starship Commander. Visions of Earth, so clear he could almost touch them, surrounded him. The fragrance of bayberry and pine grew dense and heavy.

As the illusionary aroma began to waft away from reality, he was reminded of the Christmas tree located on the recreation deck. It was decorated with ornamentation from a wide variety of cultures. This year, Dr. McCoy had managed to find some genuine popping-corn. Several members of his staff had assisted the doctor in popping it, and combining the corn with synthetic cranberries, they'd created a garland for the tree. Kirk suspected they'd eaten as much as had been strung, while they serenaded the sick bay and toasted the entire ship's complement with continued good health, aided spirits of the season.

The musical interlude had changed and a lively modern composition cheerily rang through his cabin.

Kirk stretched and shrugged off the last of his melancholia. The popcorn had turned his reminiscence to specially prepared meals shared by large groups of loved ones. His stomach growled. Well, so much for the power of suggestion.

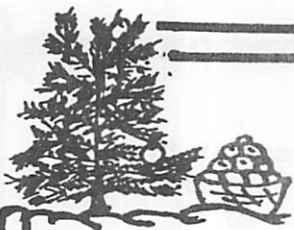
Perhaps, he considered, it was time to leave the "ghosts of Christmas past" and join his "family" in celebrating this yuletide.

McCoy and Scotty were sure to be at the recreation deck tree lighting ceremonies, appropriate beverage in hand. But first he'd take a turn on the bridge and coax Spock into accompanying him. Then they could welcome this holiday and begin new memories, together.

☆ ☆ ☆

...and the sky was bright with a holy light

☆ ☆ ☆

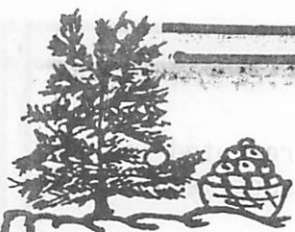


The Christmas Tree

by Mimi English

art by Jan Davies





"Fa la la la la, La la, la, la." Spock sang, then raised an eyebrow. "Ms. Uhura, is this song necessary?"

The communications officer tried to restrain a smile. "It is one of our favorites, Mr. Spock, but... you could just accompany me, if you prefer," she suggested.

"I prefer," he said in distaste, lifting his lyrette. "Many of the Christmas carols have pleasing harmonic scores, but the lyrics leave much to be desired."

"They are traditional," Uhura protested.

"Very well," he sighed.

"Besides, 'Deck the Halls' is one of the more appropriate carols," she pointed out.

"Indeed." He raised his eyebrow again as he glanced around the rec room, which was being decorated by enthusiastic crewmembers. Just then, the intercom sounded, paging the First Officer. He crossed to it.

"Spock here."

"Spock? Come to my quarters right away," Captain Kirk's voice called.

"Yes, sir." The Vulcan turned toward the door, relieved.

"Sir?" Uhura called after him, her voice anxious. "It's only a week until Christmas. You won't forget to practice?"

"A Vulcan never forgets," he intoned, gave her a slight bow, then left. Several crewmembers chuckled.

"Good exit line," one commented.

"Thought it was elephants that never forget," another grinned.

Uhura grimaced at them and clapped her hands. "All right. Back to work. 'Deck the Halls With Boughs of Holly'," she sang at them, and was joined by a rousing chorus of Fa La Las.



Spock pushed the buzzer at the Captain's cabin.

"Enter," Kirk answered. He looked up from his desk with a distracted frown and gestured the First Officer to a chair.





"Spock, Admiral Komack just called. We're being rerouted to Orchard III. The colonists are in need of immediate supplies."

"Orchard III..." Spock steepled his fingers and pondered a moment. "It was colonized five years ago by fruit growers -- apples, I believe."

"Yes," Kirk nodded. "The planet was considered perfect for their needs. However, winter has set in early this year and the weather has been extremely severe. A heavy snowfall, the first since they settled in, struck and now their stores of apples are being raided by the local wild-life," Kirk explained. "They've requested emergency aid and we're the nearest starship."

Spock considered. "It will take 5.8 days at our best speed, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "We will be a nice Christmas present for them."

"Indeed." Spock nodded.

Kirk's eyes gleamed with amusement as he regarded his First Officer, who was holding his musical instrument under one arm. "How's your Christmas program coming along?"

Spock gave him an indignant look. "It is hardly *my* program. Lieutenant Uhura is in charge. I am merely assisting her with some musical accompaniment."

"Well, I'm looking forward to it," Kirk told him. "I always enjoy your playing on that Vulcan harp."

"It is a lyrette," Spock corrected, "but thank you, Jim," he added with as close to a smile as Kirk ever saw from the Vulcan.

Kirk called the bridge and ordered the course change, then looked up at his First Officer, who was still standing before him.

"I'm tired of all this paperwork," he gestured at the reports on which he had been working. "Care for a game of chess? Or would you rather go back to work on the Christmas program?" Kirk teased.

Spock raised an eyebrow. "Need you ask?"

The Vulcan sat down in front of his captain's chess table and Kirk chuckled.



"Orbiting Orchard III, Captain," Sulu announced, six days later. Uhura swiveled in her chair.

"Captain, a call from the settlement. It's a Doctor Golden."

"Put it through," Kirk ordered. "Dr. Golden, this is Captain James Kirk of the Enterprise. You requested emergency aid?"

"Yes, Captain. Thank you for coming." A burly-looking man with greying hair gave him a relieved smile. "We've got quite a problem. Can you come right





down to discuss it? Our communications operator will give you the coordinates. Oh, and dress warmly," he warned. "It's snowing again."

"We'll be right down," Kirk assured him. "Uhura, have Dr. McCoy meet me in the transporter room. Mr. Spock?" He turned to the Vulcan. "It will be cold down there. I'll leave you in command."

Spock looked affronted. "I am quite capable of compensating for the climate, Captain."

Kirk smiled. "I know," he said in a gentle voice. "Maybe later, but it isn't necessary now." Kirk glanced around the bridge at all the hopeful faces. "Mr. Sulu? Care to inspect some apple trees?"

Sulu beamed. "Love to, sir." He leaped to his feet and they went to the lift. Spock got up from his science station and moved to the command chair, meeting Kirk's eyes with a worried look in his own.

"We'll be fine, Spock," Kirk grinned. "No Klingons, no Romulans, just apple trees and snow. Mind the store for me." He winked as the lift door closed. Spock barely restrained an exasperated sigh. Kirk always managed to get into trouble.

The captain and Sulu met Dr. McCoy, who was pulling on high boots, in the supply room. Kirk gave a good imitation of a Vulcan's raised eyebrow as they put on heavy jackets.

"Well, Uhura said snow," McCoy explained, clomping down the hall after them as they headed for the transporter.



They beamed down in front of a warehouse structure.

"Damn, it's cold, Jim," McCoy shivered. Kirk agreed. Sulu whistled, looking around at the high stockade-like fence surrounding the whole settlement.

"Looks like they're under siege."

Kirk frowned, then his attention went to the three men crunching toward them through the snow.

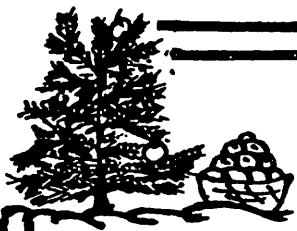
"Captain." One settler held out a huge hand and gripped Kirk's. "I'm Doctor Golden. Wanted to show you first hand what we're up against."

"This is my Chief Medical Officer, Dr. McCoy," Kirk gestured. "And my helmsman, Mr. Sulu, who is also a Botanist."

"Only as a hobby," Sulu grinned. "Quite a coincidence, you having a name like 'Golden'."

The big settler's eyes twinkled as they shook hands. "Then you'll appreciate meeting my assistants." He nodded toward the other two settlers. "Doctors Mack and Tosh."





Kirk and McCoy chuckled as Sulu exclaimed, "You've got to be kidding!"

"Well, I'm really Dr. MacDonald," the shorter of the two explained with a smile.

"And I'm Dr. Toshlivitch," the second settler, a plump man with rosy cheeks, chortled, "but it seems more appropriate to go by Mack and Tosh."

"Don't blame you," McCoy agreed, also shaking hands.

Dr. Golden gestured them into the warehouse. It was cold inside, and the three Enterprise men buttoned up their jackets.

"Just look at this." Dr. Golden pointed at upset bins of apples and gaping holes in the walls. "The beasts gnaw right through. I must have more phasers, Captain."

Kirk looked startled. "What beasts?"

"Didn't they tell you?" Golden exclaimed. "Squirrel-like creatures. At first, just a few, but now they come in droves, stealing our apples. We built that huge fence, but they either scurry over it or gnaw through. We'll be ruined! And it's not just the apples," Golden said, kicking a barrel in disgust. "They get in our homes, eat everything. Captain, we demand protection!"

"Have they attacked any of your people?" McCoy asked in concern.

"A couple men have been bitten when they grabbed at the creatures."

"I want to check them over," McCoy said to Kirk, who nodded absently as he looked around at the holes in the walls and frowned.

"Mack and Tosh will take you to our infirmary," Dr. Golden gestured. After McCoy, Mack and Tosh left, Kirk turned back to Golden, and nodded to Sulu.

"Take tricorder readings of everything," he murmured. "Doctor, how big are the creatures? Some of these holes are large."

"Like I said, they look like Terran grey squirrels, bushy tails and all. Maybe a little bigger." Golden shrugged. "Their eyes look bigger."

"Captain," Sulu called, examining the holes, "these are clearly made by teeth, sir. It looks like several animals worked together on some of them."

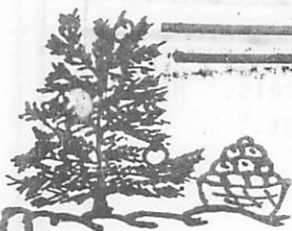
Kirk pursed his lips, watching, as Sulu ran his tricorder over a couple of half-eaten apples.

Suddenly, an apple rolled out from behind a bin and Sulu spun around.

"There go some now!" Golden whipped out a hand phaser and aimed it as a creature scooted through a hole in the wall, clutching an apple, another thief following.

"No!" Kirk grabbed his arm, deflecting the beam. It just missed the second squirrel-creature, which gave a squeak and dropped its apple, then flattened





against the wall, half stunned.

"What the -- " blustered Golden as Kirk knocked the phaser from the struggling doctor with a sudden twist.

"Sulu! Tricorder." Kirk snapped. The helmsman extended it toward the creature and took readings as it shrank back, eyes terrified.

"No shooting, Doctor," Kirk warned, releasing him and kneeling beside Sulu.

"We won't hurt you," Kirk said in a gentle voice and held out an apple. The fear in the creature's eyes left as it met Kirk's gaze, but it edged toward the hole. Kirk rolled the apple toward it. The squirrel-like creature reached for it tentatively. "Go ahead," Kirk nodded. It grasped the apple, stared at him a moment, then bolted through the hole.

"All right, Kirk, what's the big idea?" Dr. Golden demanded, but Kirk concentrated on peering through the hole. The second animal caught up to the first, which was waiting a few yards away. Kirk watched them chatter to each other and the second one gestured with its head toward the hole. They both looked back and saw Kirk watching. The creatures returned his gaze a moment, then scampered toward the fence.

Kirk straightened. "Sulu, did you get all that?"

Sulu's eyes gleamed. "Yes, sir."

"Doctor Golden, sorry to be so rough, but you don't need to kill the creatures," Kirk gave him a reassuring smile. "We can set up a forcefield around your settlement."

"But what about our trees when winter's past? They'll steal the apples right off them," Golden protested.

"We'll see..." Kirk murmured. "Tell me, Doctor, when did this problem start?"

"Well..." Golden scratched his head as he considered. "When we first arrived, there were forests everywhere. We cleared the land and planted our orchards. We have to keep cutting back the forest because things grow at a rapid rate here," Golden said with enthusiasm. "Our orchards matured in three years, which is just incredible; it usually takes five years for that kind of production. We got a bushel of apples from each one. And, last year, an excellent harvest. Incredible," he said again, shaking his head. "The yield was double what it should have been. But, this year, winter set in early. Bitter cold and snow! We never had snow before."

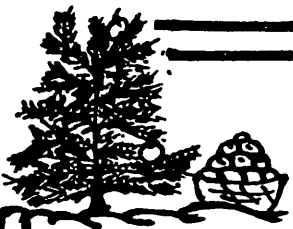
"The squirrels, Doctor?" Kirk reminded.

"Oh, well, we didn't notice any trouble with the beasts until this winter."

Kirk nodded, exchanging glances with Sulu. "That's what I thought... all the trees you cut down..." He picked up an apple with teeth-marks in it, looked at it thoughtfully, and stuck it in his pocket. Then he pulled out his communicator and spoke into it. "Uhura, get me Spock."

"Spock here." The Vulcan's voice replaced Uhura's.





"Mr. Spock, the settlers are being raided by squirrels. Have Mr. Scott rig up a low forcefield around the settlement."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Sulu and I are going to explore a bit, so leave us an access at the main gate."

"Captain, is that wise? The creatures may be hostile," Spock warned. "Perhaps I should -- "

"Stay there. We have our phasers and communicators in case of trouble," Kirk interrupted. "Besides, it's cold down here. We'll be knee-deep in snow. Kirk out."

"I was hoping you'd join my family for dinner, Captain," Doctor Golden argued as Kirk and Sulu went toward the door. "We still have a lot to discuss."

"Doctor McCoy will be glad to join you; discuss your needs with him." Kirk looked out at the falling snow. "We won't be long. Just want to scout around your orchards. Then we'll join you."

"Very well," the doctor nodded. "We'll be expecting you. Mine is the third house down from here. Looks like everyone's pretty much staying inside today," he commented as they emerged into the snow-covered street. "Can't say I blame them. The main exit to the orchard is that way," he pointed. "There's a hinged door in the fence."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Kirk and Sulu tramped through the snow toward the orchard.

"Guess Dr. McCoy was right to wear hip-boots," Sulu grinned. Kirk smiled back.

"At least we're having a white Christmas."

When they reached the apple trees, Sulu ran his tricorder over the area, frowning. "Captain, none of these trees have apples."

"Harvest is over," Kirk reminded.

"Yes, but the winter set in early," Sulu objected. "There should be a few dried ones at least. And, see how the twigs are gnawed?"

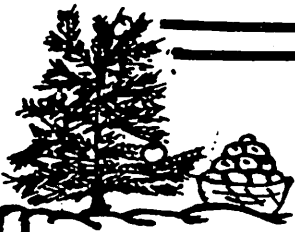
"The creatures?"

Sulu nodded. "Must be a bad year for them, too."

"And the colonists cut down a lot of their food trees," Kirk agreed. "I want you to get back to the ship. Give your tricorder readings to Mr. Spock, then meet me at Dr. Golden's home."

Sulu eyed him as he pulled out his communicator. "It's a long, cold walk back, sir. Why not beam up with me and transport down at Dr. Golden's?"





Kirk smiled. "I'm an Iowa farm-boy, remember? I'm used to snow. I like to walk in it. Brings back memories." He sighed, glancing around at the snow-covered trees. "Just listen to it a minute."

They both stood silent, hearing tinkling sounds as the snow fell.

"Even Spock would like this, if it weren't so cold," Kirk said wistfully. Sulu gave him a doubtful look.

"Yes...sir," he said, then beamed up to the Enterprise.

Kirk looked around at the peaceful scene a few moments longer. He noted that the apple trees planted closest to the forest appeared to be taller, fuller somehow, or was it his imagination? He shrugged, making a mental note to mention it to Sulu later at Dr. Golden's. Eyeing the forest thoughtfully, he started back toward the settlement.

Suddenly, he tensed as he heard a chittering noise. It grew louder. Dozens of the squirrel-creatures were scurrying away from the main gate of the stockade.

Scotty must have raised the forcefield. They're coming this way; I'd better hide. Kirk floundered toward the orchard for shelter, but he was too late. With an enraged chattering, they headed for him as he pulled out his communicator.



"More pie, Dr. McCoy?" Mrs. Golden asked.

"Yes, thank you. Best apple pie I ever ate." McCoy held out his plate.

"I thought your Captain was joining us," Dr. Golden frowned, glancing at a time-piece.

"He was supposed to, sir." Sulu also frowned. "Unless he decided to beam up to the ship and is delayed by business." Sulu opened his communicator. "Uhura, is the Captain there?"

"Why, no, isn't he with you?" she asked.

"Spock here," another voice cut in. "Is there a problem?"

"Mr. Spock, the Captain has not arrived yet," Sulu explained.

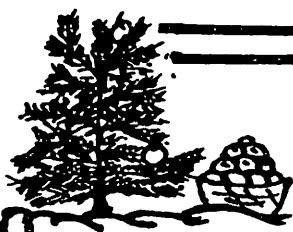
"Where did you leave him?" Spock queried tersely.

"At the edge of the orchard by the forest," Sulu told him.

"I shall transport down to his last known coordinates," Spock announced and cut off before Sulu could reply.

Spock materialized knee-deep in snow and shivered. He took a moment to set his internal temperature control, then looked around; there was no sign of the Captain, but there were many tracks made by the squirrel-creatures. He followed them for several yards, then spotted something metallic. Spock's mouth tightened





as he picked up a communicator from a pool of blood. Human blood! Any human footprints were obliterated by the squirrel tracks. Spock adjusted his tricorder for distance and zeroed in on a human life-form reading.

Jim's alive! The relief tore through him. Spock took a deep breath, then put the communicator on his belt and hurried into the forest after his Captain. As he trudged through the snow under tree branches heavily laden with the cold whiteness, one branch moved in the wind and dropped snow on the Vulcan's head and down his neck. He shivered in distaste.

At length, thoroughly soaked, he reached the edge of a large clearing. He peered from behind a tree. The clearing was free of snow, apparently sheltered by the branches of a huge tree in the center. Against its trunk, James Kirk was sitting, surrounded by the chattering squirrel-like creatures. Spock glanced at them then focused on his Captain.

Kirk appeared in good health although his clothing was torn and he was holding a blood-stained cloth against his right wrist. While Spock considered his options, a sudden chattering sounded overhead and immediately, he was surrounded by angry creatures.

Trying to force his way through them into the clearing, the Vulcan lost his balance and fell. Kirk leaped to his feet and cried out a warning as Spock was instantly covered with furry beasts.

"No!" Kirk pushed them off, waving his arms protectively. "He's my friend!" To Spock's amazement, the creatures edged away and quieted.

"Are you all right?" Kirk helped him up.

"Affirmative, Captain."

The squirrel-creatures herded the men to the giant tree, then drew back. Spock glanced around the clearing at the watching animals.

"Do you have your communicator?" Kirk whispered as they sat down against the huge tree trunk.

"And yours, Captain," Spock nodded, giving Kirk a piercing glance. "It was in a pool of blood."

Kirk looked embarrassed. "Just my wrist. When they chased me, I grabbed for my communicator and they must have thought it was my phaser and they went for it." Kirk lifted the bloodstained wrist. "They were pretty angry about the forcefield; I think they would have killed me if the two I saved hadn't spoken up."

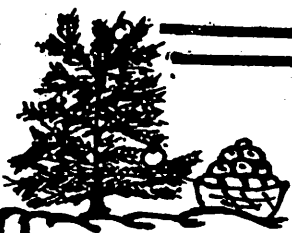
"Saved?"

"Didn't Sulu tell you about the two in the warehouse?"

"Ah, yes." Spock nodded.

"They forced me along to this place and started arguing about what to do with me." Kirk gestured at the circle of animals which had started chattering again.





Spock watched them for a few moments. It was apparent that two were arguing against the rest.

"I knew you'd come to my rescue," Kirk said softly. Spock turned his head and met his Captain's amused gaze. Then he arched an eyebrow.

"The definition of the word 'rescue' is not applicable in our present circumstance, Captain," Spock replied, a teasing lilt in his voice.

Kirk chuckled. "It's the thought that counts." Then he asked, "Would a universal translator interpret their speech?"

"If they have formulated language, we can undoubtedly translate it," Spock assured him. "Do you suspect a high level of intelligence?"

"What do you think?" Kirk gestured at the debate going on before them.

Spock observed for a moment, then asked, in a hesitant voice, "Do you wish me to attempt a mind-meld?"

Kirk frowned. "If they are only semi-intelligent, could you handle it?"

"I would need your assistance to break free," Spock admitted. "I am willing to try."

Kirk considered, then shook his head. "I don't want to risk it just now; maybe as a last resort." He met Spock's eyes and smiled a little. "If something happened to you, it would ruin my Christmas."

"Likewise, Jim," Spock responded.

Kirk met the Vulcan's warm gaze in surprise. Spock rarely spoke of their friendship; it was just-there; for Kirk to count on. He gave Spock an affectionate smile.

After a moment, Spock asked, "Have you an alternate plan?"

"Yes." Kirk got back to business. "I'll use a communicator while facing you as if we were talking, and get Uhura to play their language through the computer. Your department can attempt to adjust a universal translator and send it down to us," Kirk told him.

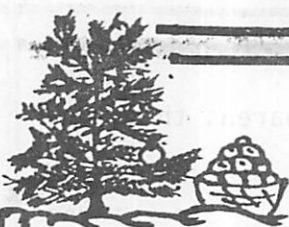
"Why do we not merely beam up to the ship?"

"Spock, the settlers are shooting these creatures on sight. I want to stop it if I can, especially if they are intelligent," Kirk said earnestly. "Don't you agree?"

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock said in a gentle voice, and slipped a communicator into Kirk's hand. The human glanced around at the arguing animals, then turned his back on them and faced Spock. He hoped the beeping sound it made would not be heard over their chatter.

"Kirk here," he said in a quiet voice.





"Captain! Are you all right? Mr. Scott was about to order a search party," Uhura exclaimed in relief.

"Spock and I are fine, at the moment. I must speak low. We are being held by a native species, possibly intelligent. Amplify my signal and pick up their speech. I would like it analyzed for the universal translator. Then get a fix on us and beam down a translator to our location. Have you got all that?"

"Aye, Captain; Scott here. If the beasties give you any trouble, I'm standing by to beam you up."

"Thanks, Scotty." Kirk lay down the communicator and the two men sat in silence, hoping the computer could handle the creatures' voices at a distance. They noticed the original two that had been defending them were joined by half a dozen more on their side of the debate.

"How long, Spock?" Kirk whispered.

"Twenty-three point five minutes since my arrival; seventeen point one since you hailed the ship," Spock whispered back. Kirk grinned at him.

"Seems longer."

Spock nodded, noting with concern that Kirk's wrist was causing him pain. "Captain, your arm needs attention."

"It's all right," Kirk muttered. Spock's acute hearing caused him to scoop up the communicator.

"Yes, Doctor," he said quickly, "on the wrist." Kirk turned his head.

"What?"

"Doctor McCoy overheard us," the Vulcan explained.

"Give me that." Kirk grabbed the communicator and gave Spock an annoyed look.

"I'm beaming down." Kirk heard McCoy's determined voice.

"Belay that, Doctor," Kirk hissed. "No interference. Just get that translator down here."

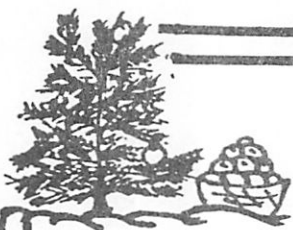
Spock touched his arm and nodded toward the squirrel-creatures. They had noticed the men holding the metallic object and edged closer, hissing and chattering in anger. Kirk laid it down and spread out his arms.

"We mean you no harm," Kirk tried to soothe them. Spock tensed, putting a hand on his own communicator, ready to push the emergency signal. Kirk's eyes brightened and he reached into his pocket. He drew out the apple he had put there back in the warehouse. He held it out toward a tiny animal. They all looked so skinny, hungry... It approached slowly, reached one little hand toward the fruit, then hesitated. Kirk set it on the ground and the creature scooped up the apple. The others started chattering to each other in calmer tones and Spock relaxed. Then they both stiffened as the whine of the transporter sounded.





J. Davis
1891



The squirrel-like creatures squealed with alarm and bolted to the trees around the clearing as two containers materialized. One was filled with apples!

"Bless Scotty," Kirk said fervently.

"Indeed," Spock responded, unpacking the second container which held a universal translator, a medi-kit with a note from Dr. McCoy on it, and a thermos of coffee and sandwiches.

"And, bless McCoy," Kirk added, seeing the food. "Are the natives gone?"

"We are being observed from the trees, Captain," Spock informed him.

"Good. Set up the translator, then have some coffee," Kirk grinned, opening the thermos. "Ummnn!"

After setting up the translator, Spock read McCoy's instructions on the medi-kit and removed a hypo.

"This is to prevent infection," Spock said, determinedly taking hold of his Captain's arm.

"Oh, all right," Kirk grumbled. Spock injected the contents, then gently unwrapped the bloody cloth, cleaned the wrist bite with an antiseptic spray and applied a plastishield over it.

"Thank you; it feels much better," Kirk murmured. "Now, eat. And drink some hot coffee," he ordered. "You look half-frozen."

Spock raised an eyebrow and quipped, "Merely my human half." He was rewarded by Kirk's surprised chuckle, then the Captain handed him the thermos lid of coffee. Spock glanced around at the trees as he sipped the hot liquid, warming his hands around the cup.

"Don't worry about them," Kirk told him. "They'll smell the food and come."

Spock gave him a puzzled glance. "You are familiar with the species?"

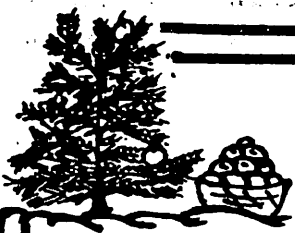
"Sort of." Kirk nodded and took a large bite of his sandwich. "Back on Earth, I used to feed the squirrels when we went on picnics... Keep eating, Spock; I'm going to get this show on the road."

"Show-on-the-road?" Spock questioned. Kirk grinned.

"Just an expression. Get things moving." Kirk took some apples and rolled them toward the trees, then bent over the translator.

"We want to share our food with you. Don't be afraid. Come and eat." A chittering sound came from the translator as the Captain's words emerged in the creatures' language. They chattered to each other with excitement, but the noise was indistinct over the translator. After a moment, a few approached with caution. Kirk rolled a couple of apples in their direction.





"Come, eat, share our food," Kirk repeated. One of them, glancing around for danger, grabbed an apple and backed away. Two more followed. They chattered to the others and that time their words translated.

"Come. We sense no danger. The Tree will protect us." Dozens more approached and took apples as Kirk exchanged a triumphant look with Spock. He motioned to his First Officer and together they dumped out the container of apples.

Immediately, droves of the squirrel-creatures descended from the trees and, chattering to each other, grabbed up the apples in their little hands. Some carried the food away, probably to feed their young, but many remained. One approached, tilting its head to regard Kirk curiously.

"You are different from the other tailless ones. You saved me and now share your food. Why? The others kill us."

Kirk straightened. "My friend and I," he pointed at Spock, "have come to make peace between our peoples," Kirk explained. "Have you leaders or spokesmen?"

The animal flicked its tail. "Each has a voice, but...there are the Elders, our Teachers and Guides."

"Yes, they are the ones with whom we wish to speak," Kirk nodded.

"We will ask. The Elders do not stir in the cold," the creature told them, then scurried away.

Spock bent close to Kirk's ear. "I presume you have something in mind, Captain."

"I'm going to try to arrange a peaceful coexistence with the settlers, but we'll have to get them to meet." Kirk frowned.

The animals grew quiet as five, apparently the eldest, very slowly approached. They perched in a semi-circle and faced the two men.

"We are the Elders," one of them chattered. "We instruct and offer guidance to the young. And, we... remember."

Kirk raised to his knees and bowed to them. "I am Captain Kirk and this is Spock," he said. "We come from a distant land."

"You are not of the others?" one asked. Another hopped forward and examined the universal translator.

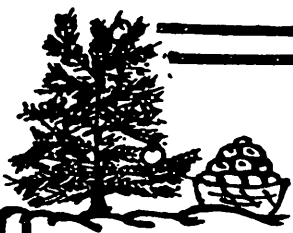
"Do you keep a Stnedor in the container?"

"What is a Stnedor?" Kirk asked, puzzled.

"One of our people," the animal replied as it sniffed the box.

"No." Kirk managed not to smile. "Mr. Spock? Can you explain it?"





Spock leaned forward and opened the translator. "This is a mechanical device. It interprets and translates all languages."

The Stnedor sniffed it over and then appeared to lose interest.

"Why do you wish to speak with us?" an Elder asked.

"Because we wish to make peace between our peoples," Kirk explained.

"Your people have killed many of us. There are females without mates, young without mothers."

"You were stealing food from the settlers. Their children will starve," Kirk defended.

"Your people destroyed many of our homes and stores of nuts for the cold time," one argued. "Our people are hungry, too."

"We will all die," another said.

Kirk's gaze swept over them. "We can all live, if we work together; we can have peace."

The Stnedor Elders stirred, chittering among themselves for a few moments.

"How can we trust a peace?" one asked.

Kirk sent Spock a questioning look. He doubted these natives would be able to accept the concept of outer space and other planets. Spock pursed his lips and frowned. Kirk decided to give them a very watered down version.

"The settlers are under my authority. They have traveled here to establish a new branch of my tribe. Spock and I have come to check on them. If we arrange a peace, they must abide by it."

Kirk glanced at Spock again. The Vulcan gave a slight nod of approval.

"It is true you are not as the others," one commented. "You brought food; you saved two of the Stnedor. We trust your words. But can we trust the others to do as you instruct?"

Kirk pounced on the key word, 'instruct'. "When you Elders instruct your young, do they follow your words?"

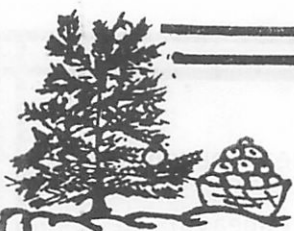
The Elders exchanged glances and chattered, their bushy tails shaking. Through the translator, it sounded like amused laughter.

"The young are the young. Most accept our guidance."

"So it is with us. I propose a meeting," Kirk suggested. "You Elders come to the settlement tomorrow, and -- "

"No!" they all cried out, squealing with fear. "There is pain there. The tailless ones will trap us and kill us!"





Kirk frowned. He had forgotten the natives had fled from the forcefield he had ordered around the settlement.

"We must have a meeting between the Elders of both tribes," Kirk argued. "I guarantee --"

"Only here will we meet. This is our Gathering Tree," one said firmly.

"Here all Stnedor bring their quarrels for settling," another explained in a calmer voice. "It is our way."

"Very well," Kirk gave in as he eyed the huge tree, a gleam in his eyes. Spock raised an eyebrow at him in question, but Kirk only winked and faced the Elders. "We will bring the Elders of our tribe here. Tomorrow is an important day for us. It is called Christmas. My tribe observes peace on Christmas. We celebrate with food and music. We do this around a tree, like you. After our meeting we will share our celebration with your tribe." Kirk waved a hand. "There will be food for all, if you will agree to this."

The Elders chattered together, then bobbed their heads.

"It is well. We will tell the others. After the meeting, if peace is made, we will all celebrate The Tree. If no peace, the tailless ones must leave our territory or our tribes will war."

"I will help you to make peace," Kirk promised. "Now, we must go make preparations."

The Elders chattered together for a moment.

"No, One Called Kirk. The other may leave and take our words to your tribe, but you must remain as a 'tseug' of the Tree." Their word didn't translate, but Kirk got the message and sighed.

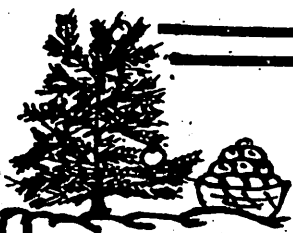
"Very well," he said with reluctance. Spock looked at him in alarm. He turned to the Vulcan. "I'll be all right, Spock," he assured. "I'm just sorry to miss out on tonight's activities. It's Christmas Eve." He sighed again. "You will have to substitute for me tonight."

Kirk thought longingly of all the parties which he had been invited to attend after officiating at the inter-faith Christmas service with the ship's chaplains. "Here's what I want you to do," he continued. "After you get out of sight, beam up and speak with Dr. Golden from the ship. Tell him to bring his two assistants and their families to celebrate Christmas with the natives. Explain things to him," he gestured. "Then, arrange for a feast of everything edible by both species. You can include fruits, breads, pastries, crackers, cheese, nuts, cookies, peanut butter, hard-boiled eggs and popcorn."

"Popcorn?" Spock inquired, puzzled.

"Yes," Kirk nodded. "Back home, Mom had us decorate a tree just for the animals at Christmas. We strung popcorn and hung the long strands on the tree along with all kinds of things such as I just mentioned. It was a tradition..." His eyes took on a far-away look for a moment, then he cleared his throat. "Also, ask Uhura to see if she would come to sing some carols. I wish... Spock, I wish we could decorate this tree. Hang colored lights on it and... and a star





at the top," Kirk said wistfully. "It would be rather appropriate."

"Captain," Spock said in a solemn voice, "I will endeavor to carry out your instructions. However, I am concerned that you will be spending an uncomfortable night here in the snow and cold."

Kirk smiled at him. "I've got the thermos of coffee and sandwiches. And there's no snow in the clearing, thanks to this enormous tree. I'll be fine."

Spock glanced at the tree and noted the whole clearing in a circle around it was strangely devoid of snow. "Most curious," he mused, then stood gazing at his Captain a long moment in silence.

"Better get going," Kirk urged. Spock nodded with reluctance and turned to leave. "Oh, Spock," Kirk called him back, "if you get a chance... in my quarters on my desk there's a package for you. Something I hope you'll like. I sent to Earth for it." He gave the Vulcan an affectionate smile. "A Christmas present."

"Indeed?" Spock returned an almost-smile. "I sent to Vulcan for yours. My mother makes a Christmas fruitcake adapted from both Terran and Vulcan recipes. I thought you might enjoy one."

Kirk beamed. "I'll look forward to it. If you get a chance, report how things are going."

"Affirmative, Captain." Spock nodded and left, bowing to the semi-circle of Elders on his way.

Kirk watched him leave and then turned to the silently watching Elders.

"Would you like an apple? There's a few left. Or, a sandwich?" Kirk looked through the bag. "Here's peanut butter. You'd like it." He held it out to them. One hopped forward, sniffed, then took it and pulled the sandwich apart, passing the pieces to the others. They all nibbled as Kirk took a large bite of a chicken sandwich.

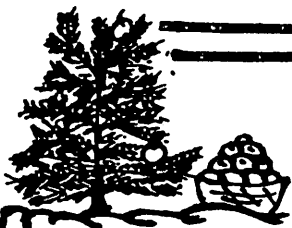
"We give thanks," they chattered at him when finished. "Now, we return to our homes until dawn. You will be left in peace as long as you remain in the clearing."

"I understand," Kirk nodded. They withdrew and Kirk leaned back against the tree trunk as he drank coffee. He shivered with cold. His jacket was torn in several places from his skirmish with the natives, but at least the wind had died down. It was getting dark. There was no moon or starlight due to the thick clouds. Kirk longed for the Enterprise and the companionship of his crew, who were enjoying the Christmas Eve celebrations. He shivered again, and snuggled back against the tree, folding his arms across his chest in an attempt to get warm. Kirk closed his eyes and tried to sleep. The tree trunk felt surprisingly warm against his back. He listened to the branches rustle and dozed.

Kirk awoke abruptly, staring in amazement as a pillar of light formed in front of him. The pillar took on the form of his Vulcan First Officer, laden down with packages.

"Spock!" Kirk hissed. "I told you to go to the ship."





"I did, Captain," Spock said evenly. "You also told me to report. I am here to do so."

"Oh... well, I didn't mean in person. You'll scare the living daylights out of the natives," he chided. Spock changed the subject.

"Dr. Golden was reluctant to agree until I played the recording of our conversation with the Stnedor. I assured him that the transporter room would be on emergency stand-by in case of any difficulties."

"Very good." Kirk nodded, eyeing the various parcels Spock had lain down. "What's all this?"

"Decorations for the tree." Spock opened one to show him. "Battery-powered lights. Only red and yellow were available."

Kirk grinned. "Hope we don't have a red or yellow alert on the ship while we're using them."

"Indeed," Spock agreed and pulled out a large silver object.

"A star!" Kirk stared in delight.

"Compliments of Mr. Scott," Spock explained. "Dietary is working on the popcorn strands," Spock added, pulling out a collapsible ladder and a light torch. "Shall we?" He gestured at the tree.

"Why not?" Kirk grinned.

Two hours later, Kirk had just finished attaching the star to the top of the tree while Spock held the ladder steady, when his communicator on the ground beeped.

"Get that, Spock," he called down.

"Spock here." The Vulcan kept one hand on the ladder as his Captain started to descend. "It's the transporter room, Captain. Dietary has the popcorn strands ready."

"Wonderful." Kirk halted half-way. "Beam them down."

A huge pile of popcorn materialized, in red, yellow and white. "Beautiful! Toss up an end to me and walk around the tree with your end, Spock."

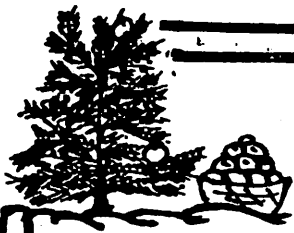
Soon all the popcorn was hung and Kirk climbed down. They stood back to admire the tree with its blinking red and yellow lights.

"Just...beautiful..." Kirk murmured.

"The Stnedor should be impressed," Spock agreed.

Kirk rubbed at his aching back, suddenly realizing how tired he was. "Think I'll get some rest." He sat down against the tree. "You'd better go on back to the ship; you look cold. See you in the morning."





Spock carried a bundle over to him and pulled out another heavy jacket for Kirk and some blankets.

"Thanks." Kirk put on the coat in relief and spread a blanket on the ground. As the Captain wrapped himself in a second blanket, Spock pulled open the last container and settled down cross-legged beside him, wrapping a blanket around his own body. He met Kirk's eyes and gestured at the container.

"A bottle of scotch from Mr. Scott, more coffee, and a message from Dr. McCoy which states that you 'have several wrapped parcels on your desk, including a bottle of Saurian Brandy from him,' and..." Spock held out a sealed container, "the fruitcake from Vulcan."

"Thank you, Spock," Kirk said gently, taking it. "But, you should return to the ship."

"I have carried out all your instructions," Spock said stiffly, avoiding Kirk's eyes. "I have no desire to participate in the endless parties currently underway." He glanced up to meet Kirk's understanding gaze.

"Very well. I will enjoy your company. Want some coffee?" Kirk opened the fresh thermos and got out the scotch. "This will warm us up."

But Spock leaned forward and pulled out another flask. "This one contains the first of the many teas in the sampler you selected for me for Christmas." He poured some hot tea and sniffed it in appreciation. "It is called 'English Breakfast.' I shall enjoy experimenting with them all."

"I know you like tea better than coffee, although you drink it," Kirk beamed. "How about some Vulcan fruitcake? You can tell me what's in it." He lifted the lid.

They spent a pleasant hour tasting the tea, the scotch and the fruitcake, while Spock gave a detailed account of how his mother prepared it.

"Well," Kirk bit into his third slice, "all I have to say is the Vulcans certainly have a way with fruit and nuts."

"Indeed," Spock agreed, finishing his second piece and wiping his fingers.

Kirk leaned back in contentment. "Not a bad Christmas Eve, after all, thanks to you." He glanced at his chronometer. "Oops...Christmas! Merry Christmas, Spock."

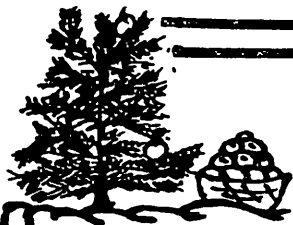
The Vulcan gazed at him a moment with glowing eyes. "Yes," he replied softly. "Merry Christmas, Jim." Kirk smiled at him and wrapped the blanket around himself, then leaned back against the tree trunk, closing his eyes.

"Yes..." he murmured back.

Kirk dozed through the rest of the night, but Spock remained awake, meditating. Just before dawn, the Vulcan nudged Kirk as he heard the hum of a transporter beam. Kirk opened his eyes to see containers of coffee and hot food materialize.

"Looks like we've got room service," Kirk grinned.





"Indeed." Spock arched an eyebrow. While they were finishing breakfast, the first couple of Stnedor approached apprehensively. They chittered to each other and fled. Kirk and Spock exchanged glances.

"Think they're afraid of the decorations on their tree?"

"It appears so, Captain," Spock agreed.

They could see more natives peeking at them from the edge of the clearing and others clinging to tree branches, all staring at their Meeting Tree and chittering.

"Don't be afraid!" Kirk called to them. "This is a day of peace. The Stnedor and the settlers will talk peace and then celebrate."

"The Tree?" several called out.

"No harm has been done," Kirk assured them. "It is our custom to decorate trees to celebrate peace. Is this not similar to your way? Come and see." Kirk spread out his arms. "There is food on the Tree, see?" He pulled at a strand of popcorn and broke off a piece. "Come on, Spock," he whispered, "it's good." Kirk put a piece in his mouth. Spock gave him a dubious look but took a piece. He did not appear enthusiastic about the taste. "Better with butter and salt," Kirk admitted, "but the Stnedor will like it."

Kirk held out the broken strand. "Come and eat."

A few hungry natives crept up and reached for the popcorn. Their eyes brightened and they reached for more. That caused the others to lose their fear.

"Captain, notice they do not ask from where the food comes," Spock murmured in his ear. Kirk nodded.

"I was worried how to explain the transporter, but I don't think it will be necessary. They just...accept things."

"Like children?" Spock suggested.

"Perhaps..." Kirk considered. "When are the settlers coming?"

"Soon, Captain. I ordered a path cleared through the snow to facilitate bringing the supplies from the settlement," Spock explained.

"Good idea," Kirk agreed.

The five Elders hopped through the other Stnedor and came up to the men.

"Your Elders have been sighted approaching," one said.

A few minutes later, Dr. McCoy, Uhura and Sul entered the clearing with Doctors Golden, Mack and Tosh, two women, and a little girl being carried by Dr. Golden. They looked uneasily at the circle of natives, but most of the Stnedor fled at their arrival.

"Hi, Jim." McCoy gave Kirk a quick look over and reached for his wrist.





"It's okay, Bones," Kirk muttered, pulling away. "Welcome," he said to the others and smiled at the nervous women. "Don't be afraid. These are the Elders of the Stnedor tribe. Come, sit down on the blankets," he gestured. The little girl was staring wide-eyed up at the decorated tree.

"Daddy, look!" she pointed.

"Yes, honey." He put her down. "Now, stay with your mother." Mrs. Golden grabbed her hand as the doctor turned back. "Captain, this is my wife and my daughter, Dee. The other lady is Dr. Mack's wife. Dr. Tosh is unmarried."

"So far." Dr. Tosh leered at Uhura, reaching for her hand.

Sulu beamed at Kirk. "It's good to see you, sir. Merry Christmas!"

"Rather good to see you, too," Kirk grinned back. Uhura, meanwhile, eluded Dr. Tosh's hand and went to Spock, handing him his Vulcan harp.

"I was hoping you would accompany me when I sing," she whispered. Spock nodded and she turned to her Captain. "Merry Christmas, sir, and thank you for the lovely music box." She kissed his cheek and smiled at his astonished face.

McCoy started to unpack and spread out the party food.

"Not now, Bones," Kirk stopped him. "Talk first, eat later."

"But, I missed breakfast, Jim," McCoy protested. "Up most of the night and all morning wrapping presents."

"Presents?" Kirk questioned.

"Yes. Uhura found out there're ten kids in the settlement, so Scotty and Chapel are holding a Christmas party for them," he explained. "Most of the crew pitched in to help decorate, donate gifts and so on."

"That's nice, but who's in charge of the ship?" Kirk demanded.

"Chekov," Sulu grinned. "He said he doesn't like snow."

"I thought they had snow in Russia," McCoy muttered. Sulu shrugged. "Anyway, Mr. Scott will return once he's through playing Santa Claus."

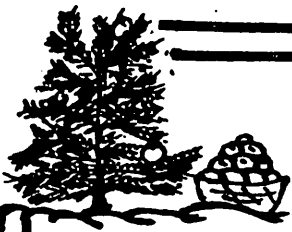
"Wish I could see that," Kirk grinned.

"Probably will, later," Sulu rolled his eyes.

"Well, everyone get settled and we'll start the meeting." Kirk looked at the Elders of the Stnedor sitting with tails held stiff and the tense faces of the colonists. Only his crew looked calm. "Uhura, would you sing something? I think it would help." He smiled.

She gazed at him a moment thoughtfully, then up at the huge tree. "I have just the thing. Mr. Spock?" She bent over and whispered in the Vulcan's ear.





"Indeed," Spock agreed and lifted his lyrette. He ran his fingers over it and then raised an eyebrow at Uhura. She nodded and sang; it was an old German carol, "Tannenbaum," meaning 'Christmas Tree.'

*O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
You stand in woodland beauty;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
You stand in woodland beauty.*

*You are as green in winter's snow,
As in the summer's richest glow;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
You stand in woodland beauty.*

*O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
With faithful leaves unchanging;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
With faithful leaves unchanging.*

*You are as green in winter's snow,
As in the summer's richest glow;
O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree,
You stand in woodland beauty.*

When she stopped, Kirk noted that not only had the settlers calmed, but the Elders' tails were more relaxed. One hopped forward a little and spoke.

"Thank you for your tree song. We have a Tree Song, too. After our peace talk, we shall do our Tree Dance."

Kirk smiled at them. "I'm sure we shall enjoy it. Now," he glanced around, "shall we talk?" An Elder bobbed his head and gazed at Kirk.

"We will hear and honor your words, O Kirk, for you are under the protection of The Tree. We observed you during the dark time. The Spirit of the Tree sent you warmth and food and permitted you to honor it."

Kirk exchanged a long look with Spock and took a deep breath. He bowed to the Elders. "I thank you. Now," he faced the settlers, "as a representative of the Federation, I am empowered to order you not to kill the Stnedor. As you can see, they are intelligent beings and it is against Federation law to harm anyone indiginous to a planet, except in self-defense."

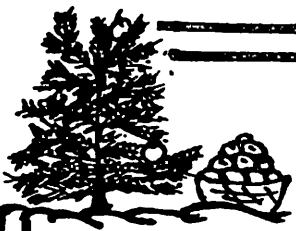
"That's all well and good, Kirk, but they were stealing our apples!" Dr. Golden objected. "They have to promise to stop raiding us."

"You cut down many of their food trees," Kirk reminded. "They managed until this unusually severe winter." Kirk turned to the Stnedor. "Can you tell us how often the winters are bad like this?"

The Elders chattered together, then one said, "We are the memory of the Stnedor. It has been seven cold times sin-e the last big snow. Our tribe cannot survive without more food, O Kirk."

"I see." Kirk nodded. "Well, that explains why they have been raiding your settlement. Now, I was summoned here to provide Emergency Aid. No reason why





I can't give it to them as well."

"I don't care what you do with your supplies. We won't have them raiding us." Dr. Golden glowered. The Elders went into a huddle and chattered together. They turned back and faced the settlers.

"If Kirk brings us food, the Stnedor will not need yours. We will not enter your tribe's territory, if you do not enter ours."

"Can we trust them, Kirk?" Golden asked doubtfully.

"We ask, O Kirk, if we can trust your tribe?" The squirrel-like natives thrashed their tails angrily. Kirk turned first to the Stnedor.

"I give you my word that the main tribe, from which this is an offshoot, will grant you protection." Turning to the settlers he continued. "I'm sure you can trust their word. My advice is that you try. If you don't...when I give my report on the situation here, you may be relocated." The humans gasped.

"Now, see here, Kirk, you can't barge in and tell us to leave," Golden protested.

"If I turn in an unfavorable report, it will be out of my hands, and yours," Kirk warned him. "A team will be sent out to study the situation. They can order you to leave. My job is to settle the present emergency, but I urge you to think ahead. Make a treaty with the Stnedor now, and save yourselves a lot of trouble." He glanced around at their faces as they thought over his words. Doctors Mack and Tosh both nodded.

"What kind of treaty?" Dr. Golden asked at last.

"The Stnedor want their territory undisturbed. That means you don't chop down their trees." Kirk faced the natives. "What is the boundary of your territory? Can you show us?"

"The Tree is our centering place. Our tribe nests about our Meeting Tree," one explained. "It is our way." Kirk stared at them.

"You mean, an exact circle with the tree at your center?"

"Yes, O Kirk," the Elder flicked its tail. "Your tribe has broken our circle."

"They didn't know..." Kirk murmured. "Can you show us, exactly?"

"We nest within a day's travel of our Tree."

Kirk looked at his First Officer. "Spock? Can you compute the distance?"

"Affirmative, Captain," Spock assured him.

"Well, then," Kirk nodded in relief, "we can mark off their boundary on our maps." He turned to the Stnedor. "We can note your territory and avoid it when my tribe wishes to expand."

"There are other tribes," an Elder interjected. "What of them?"





"Are any of them close by?" Kirk frowned.

"Our tribe has our Tree. They have theirs," was the simple reply.

"You mean every tribe has a special Meeting Tree?" Spock inquired.

"Of course!" they all exclaimed at once. Spock exchanged glances with Kirk.

"Fascinating," he murmured.

"Kirk," Dr. Golden gestured, "making deals with this group is one thing. But what if the whole damn planet is claimed by squirrels?"

"How many other tribes are there?" Kirk asked the Elders.

"We do not know. The nearest one is the red-tail Stnedor. We avoid each other's territories."

"Captain?" Spock called. Kirk nodded and the Vulcan bent to speak in his ear. "I believe we can locate the boundary of each tribe from the ship by scanning for their Meeting Trees. Each one will have a clearing."

"Excellent, Spock." Kirk smiled and turned back to the settlers. "Go ahead and make a treaty with this tribe for now. That will take care of your problems for this winter. We'll scan the whole planet and map the areas of the other tribes so you can see what land you have available. Fair enough?"

Golden exchanged looks with Drs. Mack and Tosh, then nodded. "Fair enough," he agreed. "Let's work out the details."

"Mommy, I'm hungry," piped a high voice.

"Hush!" Mrs. Golden said; Dr. Golden chuckled.

"Well, that decides it," he grinned at his daughter. "No more talk. We can finish after we eat."

"This is your young?" an Elder asked, hopping closer.

"Yes, my daughter, Dee. That's short for Delicious." He winked at his wife and child.

"Our young are also hungry," the Elder said.

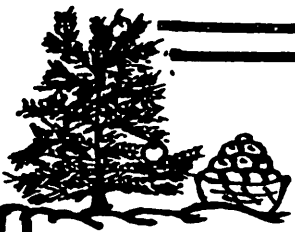
"Then, let's eat!" McCoy stood and stretched. "The young aren't the only ones hungry."

"Please, call your people from the trees," Kirk gestured. "There's food for all. We will celebrate the Tree together."

"Agreed, O Kirk. Then we will dance the Dance of Peace," the Elders bobbed their heads.

"Fine," Kirk murmured. Uhura, McCoy and the two wives had quickly spread out an assortment of edibles on the blankets. The Elders gave a high, chittering cry and the rest of the Stnedor approached, closing in behind the Elders and avoiding





the settlers. Everyone ate warily, each eyeing the other side, until Kirk, who was seated with his back against the warm tree trunk, motioned to Uhura.

"Maybe another song would help."

"Of course, Captain. Mr Spock?" she called hopefully. The Vulcan obligingly reached for his lyrette. But to his dismay she started singing "Deck the Halls." He played silently until she gave him an appealing look and, with a resigned sigh, he joined in on the chorus of Fa-la-las. McCoy snorted and Spock glared at him.

"Come on, everyone, join in," Uhura coaxed. Kirk and Sulu dutifully added their voices, and when little Dee's sweet treble popped out the settlers and McCoy also joined in. Spock cringed visibly at McCoy's off-key singing.

The Stnedor drew closer, entranced by the song. Dee stopped singing and, with a friendly smile, held out a cookie toward one of the smaller Stnedor. The creature edged closer, then, to the child's pleasure, reached for the cookie, little hands snatching and holding it.

"Ha-ha," she giggled, not noticing that everyone abruptly stopped singing to stare. As Mrs. Golden gasped, the Stnedor hopped into her child's lap and took another cookie.

"Nice kitty," Dee cooed, while it ate the cookie.

"Well, well..." Dr. Golden smiled. More natives came up to the child and she giggled and handed out cookies.

"I'll be damned..." McCoy muttered.

" 'And a little child shall lead them,' " Uhura said softly.

Everyone relaxed, settlers and Stnedor, and all shared the Christmas feast. When the food was gone, Kirk looked at Doctor Golden.

"Well, Doctor, do we have a treaty?"

"If they agree, then we'll agree," he nodded.

Kirk stood. "The Treaty of Peace between the Settlers and the Stnedor will be this: The settlers will not harm the Stnedor nor trespass on their territory without permission. If this is agreed, I will provide supplies to both tribes. Doctor?" Kirk held out his hand to Golden, who looked at his assistants and the wives. All nodded.

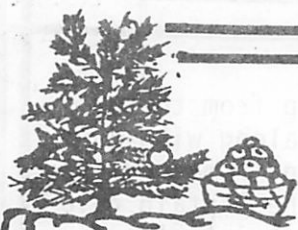
"Agreed, Kirk." Golden grasped his hand.

"Elders?" Kirk stooped, still retaining a hold on Dr. Golden's hand and stretched the other to the natives. The five Elders hopped up to him.

"Agreed, O Kirk." They laid their little hands on his. Kirk carefully brought his two hands together.

"Then, we have Peace." He smiled.





"Peace!" the Elders squeaked to the rest of their tribe. The others chattered in excitement.

"We shall do our Tree Dance now." The Elders hopped away. All the Stnedor, old, young, male and female, formed two rings around the clearing. It looked like the males were in the inner ring and the females in the outer ring. They proceeded to shuffle around the Tree while the settlers and Enterprise officers sat in the center, watching. All the Stnedor joined in chanting the Tree Song, repeating it several times. Their bushy tails flipped in time as they shuffled around and around the tree, each ring going in opposite directions.

*Great Tree, Parent Tree,
Giver of shelter, food and warmth,
Peace comes within your sway,
O Meeting Tree, your children sing.*

*Joy, joy, peace and joy,
All is well within your sway;
Protector Tree, Spirit Tree,
All is well, your children sing.*

Everyone watched, half-mesmorized, except Spock, who looked up at the tree top and raised an eyebrow. He turned on his tricorder and studied it while the Stnedor danced, then he leaned toward his Captain, who was staring in rapt attention at the dance.

"Captain... Jim." Spock grasped his shoulder. Kirk blinked a moment, and looked at Spock.

"Very hypnotic," he murmured.

"Indeed," Spock whispered. "Look up at the tree." Kirk looked up and barely restrained a cry. The branches were swaying and bending in time to the Stnedor's chant. He stared, then met Spock's eyes.

"It's...alive?" he whispered. Spock gave a slight nod. "Is it...aware of us?"

"Unknown," Spock whispered back. They both watched the tree in silence until the Stnedor finished their dance.

The five Elders broke the circles and approached as the watching Humans blinked and began to stir. They glanced around and saw to their surprise that the sun was setting.

"We'd better be getting back." Dr. Golden stretched.

Kirk nodded. "I'll contact you tomorrow with information on the other tribes," he assured him. "Be prepared to give us a list of the supplies you need and we'll leave a universal translator in case you need it." He ended with a smile. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas; Merry Christmas," all the humans said to each other. As the settlers left, Kirk turned to his crew.





"Go back to the settlement and return to the ship from there. I'll join you in a few minutes." He gestured them *along with* a reassuring smile. Spock handed Uhura his lyrette and remained. Kirk shot him a look, but the Vulcan ignored it. The Captain gave in and faced the Elders. The rest of the Stnedor had scattered back into the trees.

"Tomorrow I shall return with supplies for your tribe and I will remove the lights we placed on your tree," he said to them.

"You may go, O Kirk, we trust your words. You are of the Spirit of the Tree."

Spock gave Kirk a relieved glance as they walked through the forest.

"Didn't you think they'd let me go?" Kirk asked.

"I was uncertain, Captain," Spock admitted.

Kirk grinned. "So was I," he also admitted. "That's why I sent the others ahead. What do you make of the Tree?" he changed the subject.

"Most interesting." Spock pursed his lips. "My tricorder readings indicate it is indeed a sentient being, although I was unable to ascertain its level of intelligence."

Kirk frowned as they crunched through the snow past the orchards. "At first, the trunk wasn't noticeably warm, but it seemed to grow warmer the longer I leaned against it."

"It was obviously aware of the Stnedor's dance."

"Perhaps it felt the vibrations," Kirk suggested.

"It moved in time with their song, Captain, not their feet," Spock corrected. "And, it must be responsible for the clearing remaining without snow."

"Well, that could just be from the heat of the roots," Kirk argued. "On Earth, large trees often have a clear circle around them and they aren't sentient."

Spock paused and gazed at him a moment. "There are degrees of sentience, Captain," he said. "At any rate, further study is indicated. It is apparent the Stnedor revere it."

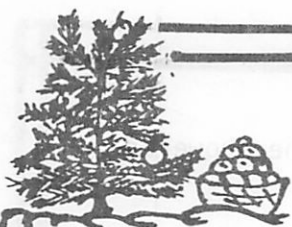
"Yes," Kirk agreed as they reached the settlement. The Captain opened his communicator. "Beam us up, Mr. Scott."

After they materialized, Kirk and Spock went directly to the bridge.

"Welcome back, Captain," Mr. Scott greeted him.

"Thank you, Scotty," Kirk smiled as the Chief Engineer vacated the command chair and Kirk slid into it. He glanced over to where Spock had started working with his computers, then looked at Sulu and Chekov. "We are going to survey this planet, gentlemen, and attempt to map the location of all the Stnedor tribes. We'll need full magnification on all viewers."





"Captain?" the Vulcan called from his station, "I have adjusted the sensors to detect heat emanations from the Stnedor Meeting Trees."

"Good idea," Kirk approved. "That will speed things up." He turned back to Chekov and Sulu. "Each tree is the center of a tribe and is set in a clearing. Let's go to work."

They had been mapping for two hours when Dr. McCoy bounced out of the lift.

"So, there you are," he greeted Kirk with a scowl. "I want to check your arm."

"Not now, Bones," Kirk objected. McCoy whirled on Spock.

"And you!" he called. Spock looked up abstractedly.

"You wish to see me, Doctor?"

"Not me, Uhura. Did you forget about the Christmas pageant? It's only an hour from now," McCoy reminded. Spock glanced over at Kirk.

"Go along, Spock. I'll get you a relief-person," his captain smiled. Spock hesitated.

"Sir, with all due respect, it is not necessary for you to supervise the mapping process. Mr. Sulu is quite capable with Mr. Chekov's help."

"Yes, sir," Sulu gave Kirk a cheerful smile. "I had enough partying last night and you missed out on them all."

"Also, I insist on checking your arm," McCoy said with a determined glint in his eyes.

"I would like to see the Christmas program," Kirk gave in. "Call me if you run into any difficulty."

"Yes, sir. It's slow going, but not difficult, Captain," Sulu assured. "And only three trees, so far."

"Indeed," Spock agreed. "Based on the area already covered, I estimate twelve trees on the planet."

"Well, I hope you're right," Kirk commented. "That will leave plenty of room for expansion for the settlers."

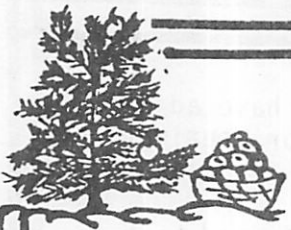
As the three men got off the lift at Deck Five, Kirk gestured at his tattered clothes. "I'm going to take a shower and change, first."

"I'll wait for you, Jim." McCoy followed.

"Perhaps I, too, should change, Captain." Spock eyed his wet shoes and bedraggled uniform.

"Good, we'll all go over together," Kirk smiled. "I'm looking forward to it."





Dr. McCoy waited in the Captain's quarters while he showered and put on a clean uniform.

"Now I'm checking your arm." McCoy took hold of it. Kirk sighed and stood impatiently while McCoy examined his injured wrist. The door buzzer sounded.

"Come in, Spock," Kirk called. The Vulcan entered and looked with concern as McCoy rebandaged Kirk's wrist.

"It'll do," the doctor said gruffly. "You're lucky those squirrels' teeth didn't tear off your hand."

"They're basically peaceful," Spock told him. "Remember the words of the Tree Song. They hold peace in high regard."

"Yeah, that was something, them dancin' around that tree," McCoy said as they went out the door.

"Indeed. Captain, do you realize we hung 'popcorn' on their God?" Spock remarked. Kirk's face reddened.

"Not their God, Spock; more like a...a..."

Spock raised an eyebrow.

"Well, it didn't seem to mind," Kirk defended.

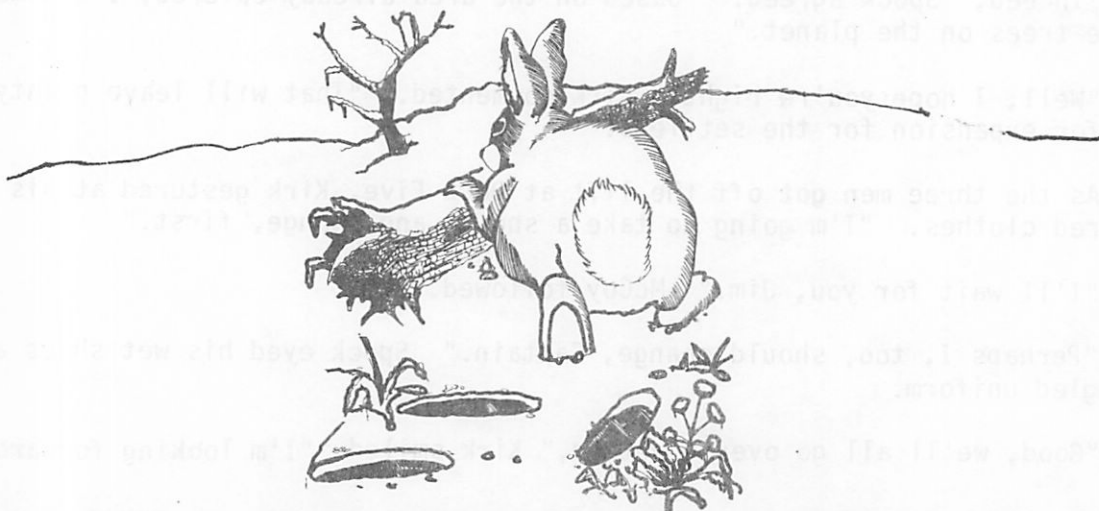
"Fortunate," Spock said drily.

"I think it's lucky we showed up at Christmas. All that tree business fit," McCoy commented. "Quite a coincidence."

Spock eyed him. "I do not believe in either 'luck' or 'coincidence.'"

McCoy bristled. "Used to be folks didn't believe in 'Little green men from outer space' either," he snapped.

Kirk chuckled. "Come on, you two; let's get to the party."





THE fight

Ginna LaCroix

Tension-filled minutes passed as the
Unseen danger mounted.
They were out there -- somewhere --
Waiting -- as he was waiting.
He looked at his crew,
Each one as tense as he felt,
Yet he could not show fear
For he led them and, because of that,
Must appear confident and calm.
He strained to hear any movement,
The swirling snow made it impossible to see.
Wait!
Was that something?
A triumphant yell sounded from above.
He looked up to see the wall had been breached
And Spock standing there, armed to the teeth.
The snowball fight had begun!





AND
TO
ALL

A GOOD NIGHT



by Maggie Manlove

art by Jacqueline Zoost

Captain's Personal Log

Stardate 6345.5 ... Old Earth Reckoning, December 24

Our current mission, that of providing first-class taxi service for the Borgellian Concillate, their aides and their families, from Borgel V to Starbase Twelve, is progressing to a smooth close. We hope to reach our destination before Terran New Year.

This would be a routine, even boring mission, were it not for a few choice circumstances. First, our route skirts the Romulan Neutral Zone ... an element of risk that serves to keep my tired crew on their toes. We've seen no indication of our hostile neighbors so far, but I'm keeping the ship on standby alert -- just in case.

Second, among our passengers -- er, make that 'distinguished guests' -- is Fleet Admiral Jake Sanders. His lovely wife, Eleanor, the renowned exobiochemist, accompanies him -- much to the delight of my First Officer. Also aboard are thirty-two children, ranging in ages from six months to fourteen years. All are as 'rambunctious' (that's Bones' word) as children can be expected to be when their lives are in a state of upheaval. We rarely have children aboard the Enterprise... but despite my lack of experience, I'm finding I enjoy them.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, it is Christmas-time. Because this is the last major Terran holiday we will enjoy on this five-year mission, the crew (with my blessing) has decided to 'do it big' this time.

I've already done it big enough, Bones tells me... about two-and-a-half kilos too big!

Captain James T. Kirk thumbed off the recording switch on his desk console and rose to his feet, stretching luxuriously. A slow smile spread across his boyish face. Thoughts of Christmases past filled his mind, as he strode out into his ship's corridors to begin his evening's social rounds.

Leonard McCoy removed the last medical update tape from his viewer and paused with his hand in mid-air as he spotted the Captain. Kirk stood in the open Sickbay office doorway, smiling, seeming to bask in the familiarity of his surroundings.

McCoy waved him in with a smile. "Evenin', Jim. Glad you stopped by."

"Now, that's the kind of greeting a tired Captain likes to hear," Kirk grinned as he dropped into a vacant chair. "None of my crew are spending Christmas in stasis or in agony, no unknown viruses are dissolving the hull of my ship, no 'she's dead, Jim'..." Kirk helped himself to the brandy McCoy had placed on the desktop, then leaned back, bracing his feet on the desk's edge opposite the doctor. "Just a friendly, relaxing cup of Christmas cheer." He took an appreciative sip. "Perfect, Bones. My compliments."

McCoy nodded his gracious acceptance of the praise and lifted his glass in a toast. "To you, Captain. Peace and joy and Happy Hanukkah," he intoned in as Spockian a voice as he could muster.

Kirk nearly choked on his drink. "Wha-- ?"

"I thought that'd get your attention," McCoy laughed, tickled at the doubletake.

Kirk shook his head. "You're hopeless," he accused fondly.

"Yup." The good doctor laughed again. He tried not to meet his Captain's openly affectionate gaze, but wasn't quite successful. It was good to see his friend relaxed for a change.

"So. How's business?" Kirk asked after they had downed their drinks in companionable silence.

McCoy gave him a sour look. "I hope you didn't come down here to talk shop on Christmas Eve."

"Who, me?" Kirk put on his best angelically innocent face, then shook his head. "Listen, I've heard enough lectures on the hazards of overwork today to last me a lifetime."

"Oh, really?" McCoy's ears perked up at this news. "Who's trying for my shingle now?"

"Would you believe Spock?"

McCoy snorted. "He's got no room to talk."

"I agree, but you ought to hear him." Kirk tried to mimic Spock at his solicitous best: "'Would you care for a game of handball, Captain?' and 'Would you like to go for a walk, Jim?' Hell, there's even a rumor making the rounds that he's trying to set me up with that pretty blonde aide to the Concillate."

McCoy's eyes widened.

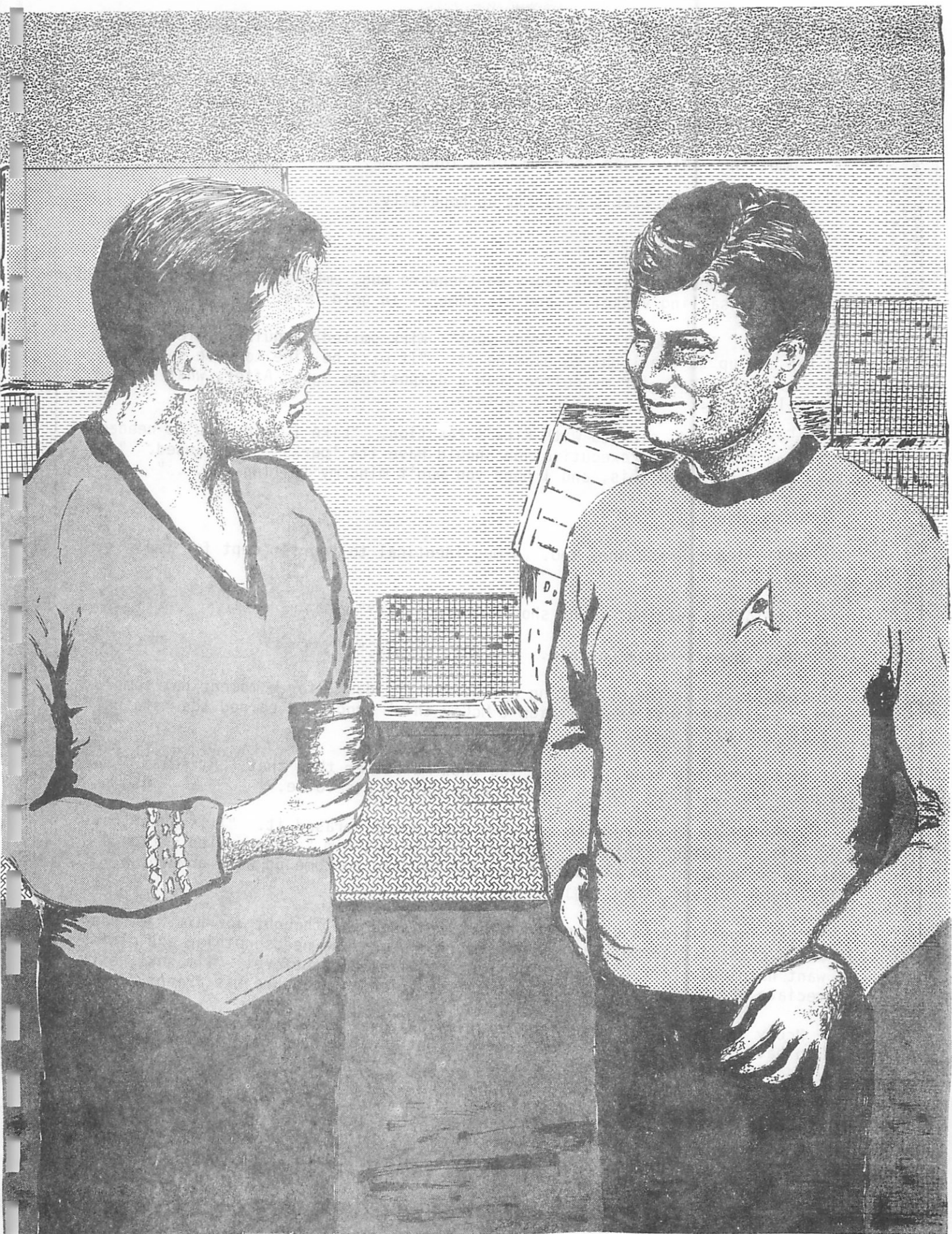
"Really, Bones! He's worse than you on one of your *bad* days!"

"I wonder what he's up to... ?" McCoy muttered under his breath. He looked at Kirk. "Too bad he won't take some of his own advice. I had to threaten him with incarceration to get him to agree to some shut-eye tonight. I don't think he's caught a decent night's sleep since we took on this boatload of hotheads."

"You mean, since we took on Dr. Eleanor Sanders. He's been too busy studying with her to bother to sleep."

They talked for another hour, about everything and nothing -- from the Christmas traditions of Kirk's Iowa boyhood to the doctor's rocky last year on Earth after his divorce. Eventually, their talk returned to the present holiday.

"Before I forget..." Bones dug into a seldom-used cabinet behind his desk and produced a small package. "Unless you'd rather have it tomorrow, I thought I'd beat the rush." He handed the square box to Kirk. "Merry Christmas, Jim."



"Why, thank you, Bones," Kirk grinned. While McCoy ignored him, he proceeded to give the little parcel a deliberately suspicious and thorough eyeballing, as though it were made of antimatter. "What is it?" he finally asked.

"Something you've been needing for a long time."

"A new yeoman?" Kirk's eyes lit up hopefully.

"Open it and see."

Kirk unwrapped an elegant ivory earthenware mug, emblazoned with a small picture of an ancient sailing vessel -- and his name -- in gold leaf.

"Bones... it's beautiful. Thank you!" Kirk smiled, genuinely pleased. He held the cup up to the light to examine it. "It *will* be nice to have something a little... classier... for my coffee than a disposifoam cup. After, what -- four and a half years? -- as a starship captain."

McCoy chuckled, pleased with Kirk's reaction. "Like I said, you've needed it for a long time. Every executive job should have its 'perks.'" He paused. "Jim -- I hope you won't mind this, and I hope you won't mind my telling you..."

"What, Bones?"

"Well, I got Spock one, too. A mug identical to yours, 'cept for the monogram."

Kirk looked puzzled. "Why should I mind that?"

"Because he's not a Captain. Not yet, anyway."

Kirk stared at the man facing him across the desk, for a moment not comprehending what he'd just heard. Didn't McCoy think Spock had earned the "status" of a damned coffee mug...? No, wait a minute....

Kirk shook his head. "McCoy, you know me better than that. At least I *hope* you do." He could not keep a certain edge out of his voice.

McCoy's peeved expression answered that doubt, erased it. "It's just that I... well, I couldn't think of anything *else* to get him," he grumbled. "You'd think after knowing him all this time, I'd be able to come up with *something*, but... damn Vulcans, they're just..."

"... impossible to choose for," Kirk finished the thought for him. "I know." It was a classic dilemma: what do you get for a man who needs nothing and claims to want nothing? Kirk had faced the problem with Spock before. "I'm sure he'll appreciate whatever you give him, Bones," he tried to reassure his friend.

McCoy sighed. "All I want is for him to appreciate Christmas, Jim. I want him to have fun, to feel the excitement... but I can't even get him interested in the basic activities!"

Kirk shook his head again. "You're going about it all wrong, Doctor. Spock is not Human."

"Don't you think I know that?" McCoy scowled. "What's that got to do with it?"

"He doesn't need festivities to appreciate Christmas, Bones. You can't make him enjoy something by... well, by bludgeoning him over the head with it," Kirk tried to explain. "All you're going to do is get him fed up with the whole idea."

"And I suppose you've got a better approach?" McCoy retorted sarcastically.

Kirk carefully replaced his mug in its container, swung his feet to the floor and sat up. "Yes, I have," he said. "Be nice to him."

McCoy stared at him. "You've had too much to drink."

"No, I... "

"... can't be serious," McCoy interrupted, flaring. "Me be nice to Spock? What'll that accomplish... besides driving me crazy?"

Kirk leaned forward across the desk and chuckled softly. "Think about it, Bones," he whispered conspiratorily. "It'll drive him crazy."

Two decks above the good doctor's office, Spock was the subject of another serious discussion as 14 year old Svea and Elsa Sanders struggled to set their waist-long tresses in the ornate, traditional Vulcan style.

"D'you think he'll notice us?" the petite Svea asked, critically eyeing her reflection in the mirror.

"If he notices any woman on board, he should notice us," her fraternal twin replied confidently as she reached for another fastener. "It's only logical that he should."

"Oh, darn," Svea groaned as the piled construction on her head collapsed for the fourth time, "I wonder how the Vulcan women do this?"

"Maybe they use mind control," Elsa offered hopefully. "If we concentrate hard enough..."

"But who can concentrate on anything when he's around?" Svea whispered breathlessly. She laid a hand over her heart in gothic-herpine fashion. "He's so... beautiful!"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. It shouldn't matter what you concentrate on, so you think about Spock..."

"Yeah...?"

"...and the hair will stand up of its own accord!"

Green eyes met amber in the mirror, and the room was filled with wickedly feminine adolescent laughter.

"Pavel, just what do you plan to do with three meters of snow on a starship?" Kirk asked gently.

The quiet afternoon had given way to a quiet evening. After he had left McCoy's office, Kirk had stopped by the central computer room to see how Lt. Sulu's pet project was coming along. Sulu had approached him earlier in the week with the proposal of a pyrotechnic display -- an old fashioned Oriental fireworks show in space, to be viewed from the ship's great observation deck -- as a possible source of entertainment for the guests and crew. Kirk had agreed; it sounded like fun. But now, Chekov, not to be outdone by his inscrutable friend, had come up with something even more outlandish: snow on Rec Deck Three. Kirk hated to turn him down, but...

Chekov paused. He looked as if the question had never occurred to him; Kirk suspected that he was trying very hard to come up with a reasonable answer. Sulu turned his back on the discussion, busying himself with last-minute adjustments to his program. Chekov didn't need his help. He could sell snowballs to the Eskimos with one roll of his gorgeous eyes.

"I would like to build a palace, Keptain -- like the vons I saw in Leningrad as a child." Kirk bit his lip, considering, and Chekov warmed to his subject. "Most of the boys and girls from Borgel hef never seen snow, sair. Eet would be an education for them!"

'Education...?' In spite of himself, Sulu snickered, a disdainful sound. Kirk turned to him.

"What do you make of this idea, Hikaru?" he asked, wavering. "Any suggestions, recommendations?"

Sulu carefully schooled his face to almost Vulcan neutrality before turning around to face his commanding officer. "I wouldn't be the one to ask if you want an objective opinion, sir," he demurred, casting an apologetic glance at Chekov. "I remember the last time we had a snowstorm in the Rec Room -- that time the computer malfunctioned. I had to spend the rest of my off-time in Sickbay being treated for frostbite!"

Kirk nodded and re-directed his attention to the busily plotting Russian. "Yes, what about that, Pavel? Can you guarantee the safety of any and all participants in your 'educational' blizzard?"

"Keptain!" Chekov replied confidently, saluting his C.O. smartly for added effect, "I vill be so careful, ewery indiividual flake vill hef eets own place -- preprogrammed!"

Kirk smiled indulgently at the young officer's enthusiasm. Why not? What harm could come of a little snow, safely contained? A white Christmas... yes. He could just imagine introducing Spock to a fat, wet snowball...

"All right, Lieutenant," he nodded, outwardly all business. "You'd better get cracking. You have quite a few flakes to program by 1200 hours tomorrow!"

Chekov blanched. He had not expected his offer to be taken so...literally. "Yes, sair!" he breathed, his smile frozen to his face. Kirk turned for the door while, behind him, Sulu clutched his sides in silent, aching laughter.

"There he is," Elsa whispered, peeking around the door into the main recreation area where Spock sat tuning his lyrette. "Oh, I can't stand it!"

"Let me see!" Svea demanded, leaning out around her sister for a glimpse of their chosen idol. But all she could see was the back of a beautiful dark-skinned woman in a red uniform. The woman was talking to Spock. Svea turned away.

"Okay, it's time we made our move," she decided abruptly. "You ready?"

"Yeah."

"All right, let's go. And remember, no smiling." Svea gathered up the hemline of her billowy Vulcan gown and started across the open floor.

"Hey, slow down!" Elsa hissed desperately behind her. "I can't walk in this crazy dress... it keeps tripping me! Svea, wait!"

Svea froze in her tracks, but not because of Elsa's pleas. Directly in front of her, Commander Spock was rising from his chair and turning toward her.

"Ohmyghod, I can't..." she squealed, stricken. "Here he comes!"

"WHAT?!"

"Here he comes, you dope!" There was no time to hide to make adjustments. For better or worse, they were committed. "C'mon -- stand up and act mature."

Spock crossed the room directly in front of the held-open door, to the intercom, where he proceeded to make a brief call to the Bridge. Even though not addressed to them, his deep rich voice held both girls in silent thrall.

Gradually, Spock became aware of the sensation of being watched. He turned to find a pair of outlandishly dressed children gaping at him with starmisty expressions of adoration. He returned the stare for a long, uncomfortable moment, then cleared his throat. "May I...assist you?" he offered hesitantly.

The shorter of the two, the one with green eyes painted copiously round with kohl, stepped forward and lifted her hand in the Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Commander Spock," she intoned in a surprisingly grave voice. Her sister giggled.

Spock returned the salute. "Live long and prosper, Miss...?"

"Sanders. I'm Svea, and this is my sister, Elsa."

"Ah, yes," said Spock, recalling the young faces beneath the garish makeup. He wondered if this were another Christmas custom he'd never heard of. "The Admiral's daughters." He doubted that their father knew they were running around looking like this. "I trust you are enjoying your journey."

His tone was absolutely neutral. The girls exchanged glances. This time it was Svea whose composure dissolved into giggles. Elsa rolled her eyes heavenward. "We are now," they enthused in tandem.

"How's it going, Lieutenant?"

Kirk ambled across the main recreation room, wearing his best late-evening casual manner, cradling a lukewarm cup of coffee in his hands. Chief communications officer Uhura wanly returned his smile, then plopped without ceremony into the nearest chair.

Kirk followed her with appreciative eyes. He hoped privately that she had not bitten off more than she could chew. As talented as she was both musically and organizationally, Uhura was being stretched to her limits by masterminding a Christmas pageant with twenty-five small children.

"It's going, anyway, sir," she sighed. "I believe we're ready. But if I don't hear another 'fa-la-la-la-la' for a decade, the next one I do hear will be too soon!"

Kirk's brows knit in dismay. "Uhura, where's all that Christmas spirit you had yesterday? I was counting on your abundant surplus to get us through this in one piece."

Uhura chuckled softly and shook her head. "Captain, whatever spirit you saw -- or *think* you saw -- yesterday, got up and flew the coop. Days ago. I'm afraid if you want any more, you're going to have to apply to the North Pole for a refill."

Kirk was about to ask her how to go about such a task when his attention was taken by a minor commotion on the improvised soundstage. Two very tired small boys had squared off, ready to do battle over who-got-to-stand-in-front-of-whom in the final number. Uhura heaved herself out of her chair and moved to break it up before any more noses could be bloodied. When she returned, she looked so drawn that Kirk's casual concern deepened at once into real alarm.

"Lieutenant," he said gently, "I know this whole production was your idea, and you're rightly proud of it...but if you're over-extending yourself..."

The lovely Bantu woman grinned up at her Captain with a devilish expression. "Why, Captain, surely you don't think the Enterprise will fall from the heavens if her resident mother gives up the ghost?"

Kirk frowned. "Well, no, but..."

Uhura laughed. "I'll admit, it's an awful temptation. But don't worry, sir." She shook her head with mischievous solemnity. "I won't." She pouted. "Although a lady could certainly wish for a little help from old Saint Nick."

"Be careful what you wish for," Kirk smiled, "you may get it."

Uhura made an insubordinate face. Kirk cleared his throat and looked around the room, changing the subject.

"Have you seen Mr. Spock this evening?" he asked. "I thought for sure I'd find him down here with all these kids."

"He *was* here earlier, sir," Uhura replied, "but when the Treacherous Twins started in on him, he left. I think he's hiding," she added with a chuckle.

Kirk stared at her. "Treacherous Twins?" This sounded ominous...

"Admiral Sanders' teenaged girls, Svea and Elsa, sir. They're in love with Mr. Spock as only fourteen year olds can be, and..."

"And I think I get the picture," Kirk smiled knowingly. "Okay, Lieutenant, I know where to look for him, then. Thank you. Carry on."

"Don't I always?" Uhura laughed impishly.

Spock was ready for bed as he had seldom been ready before: he was frankly exhausted. The day had been a long one, full of the aggravating details-gone-awry that might be expected when Christmas and company were added to the routine hectic operation of a Starship. The First Officer in charge of those details looked forward to a few hours of meditation and rest before plunging in to tackle them again. He slipped into a warm, dark Vulcan robe and moved to the terminal on his immaculate desk to program an early-morning wake-up call.

The door-chime sounded.

Spock sighed. What is this? he wondered. Christmas carolers, perhaps, or Nurse Chapel with another offering of that awful fruitcake? Or -- heaven forbid -- the Twins?

"Who is it?" he called.

"It's Jim."

"Come."

The door slid open to reveal his Captain, bearing an enormous silver-wrapped package.

"Got a minute, Spock?" Kirk smiled hopefully as he entered.

Spock resisted returning the smile with some difficulty. He had not even considered the possible arrival of Father Christmas.

"Of course, Captain." He gestured Kirk to the extra desk chair and offered him a drink.

"That hot Vulcan stuff? You bet!"

Spock poured each of them a celebratory glassful, and Kirk lifted his in a toast. "Peace and goodwill to you, Mr. Spock."

"Long life and prosperity be yours, Captain," the Vulcan returned solemnly, and they tipped back the fiery liquid together, as brothers united in diversity.

"Whew!" Kirk sighed, relaxing contentedly back into his chair. He looked across at Spock and smiled. "You know, this is the first time I've really caught up with you in a couple of days. How have you been?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow, amused that Kirk should ask. "Harrassed," he admitted.

Kirk tactfully refrained from grinning. "Yeah, so I've heard." He shifted in his chair. "You might be wise to avoid the company of Mrs. Sanders."

"Indeed." Spock did not explain that he had been referring to McCoy.

"Other than that, how are you?"

"My time has been fully occupied, Jim. One might even say I have been 'frantic.'"

Kirk's eyes widened at this second startling admission. It was totally unlike Spock to complain, no matter how bad the circumstances.

"I know what you mean," he replied carefully. "As much as I enjoy the holidays, I'm always glad when the hullabaloo is over." He paused, surveying the Vulcan for a long moment. "What do you make of our Human Christmas customs, Spock?" he asked. "This is the first time you've actually taken part in the celebration, isn't it?"

Spock nodded. "And hopefully my last time, as well. I have found the entire practice to be an ordeal woefully lacking in logic... as I believe you may already have guessed."

Kirk chuckled. "Ahh, Spock, you sound like Ebenezer Scrooge." He affected an exaggerated frown. "Bah, humbug!"

"Ebenezer Scrooge was a remarkably logical man, Captain. Until he succumbed to the seasonal madness, that is."

"Explain, please," Kirk requested, only half-teasing. "What don't you like about Christmas, Spock?"

Spock drew himself up regally and began to state his case with all the flair of a Samuel Cogley associate. "Point one: Christmas celebrates the supposed-but-unproven birthdate of only one of your world's several dozen religious founders, Captain. I see no reason for the exclusion of the others; indeed, I see no reason to celebrate Christ's birthday at all. His birth was by no means his greatest accomplishment."

Kirk shrugged. "The sifting of history."

"Apparently so. Point two: Did not Christ's teachings include a famous lesson in the sanctity of the body? I believe he called it the 'temple of the spirit'?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Why, then, do you celebrate this teacher's birthday with the indulgence-to-excess of non-nutritive dietary items?"

Kirk grinned ruefully, trying not to look down at his stomach. "Good point."

"Thank you. Point three: Did not this same Jesus teach, by example as well as by word, that 'love' -- or the laying down of one's life for one's friends -- was the greatest of gifts?"

"He did."

"Why, then, the seemingly compulsory exchange of impractical trinkets that nobody needs? It seems a most useless, illogical custom..."

Kirk sighed. "Another good point, Spock," he conceded. "But stop -- please. You're spoiling all my fun."

Spock gazed at him, amused. "Of course, Jim," he apologized mildly. "Far be it from me to ruin your enjoyment of your...debauchery."

Kirk set down his drink, hard. Debauchery, indeed. He leaned over and retrieved the large package that sat on the floor beside him, and practically shoved the gift into Spock's hands. "I'll debaucher you," he muttered. "Here. I doubt we'll have a minute's peace once the party gets underway..."

Spock accepted the offering wordlessly, his eyes on his Captain. Kirk had seen that look before -- a puzzling blend of reproof and shy appreciation. The Vulcan sat for a long moment, just fondling the delicate bow of lacey silver and holly leaves. Finally he looked up again. "Jim..."

Kirk smiled. "Merry Christmas, old friend."

"I...thank thee." Spock's voice was very quiet.

"Go on, open it," Kirk urged impatiently when Spock didn't move for a long moment. "I want to see what you think of it."

The First Officer considered a second longer, then shook his head. "Not yet," he said, and reached back into his desk drawer. He pulled out a small box wrapped simply in red. "Not until you open yours."

Kirk reached for the gift with a spreading grin. "Spock, didn't I hear you say -- not two minutes ago -- that the exchange of trinkets was an illogical custom?"

Spock almost shrugged. "You may have," he replied evasively. "But logic isn't everything, Captain. That much you have taught me, Merry Christmas, Jim."

Kirk laughed aloud in astonishment. Would miracles never cease? He would have to tell McCoy all about this, later.

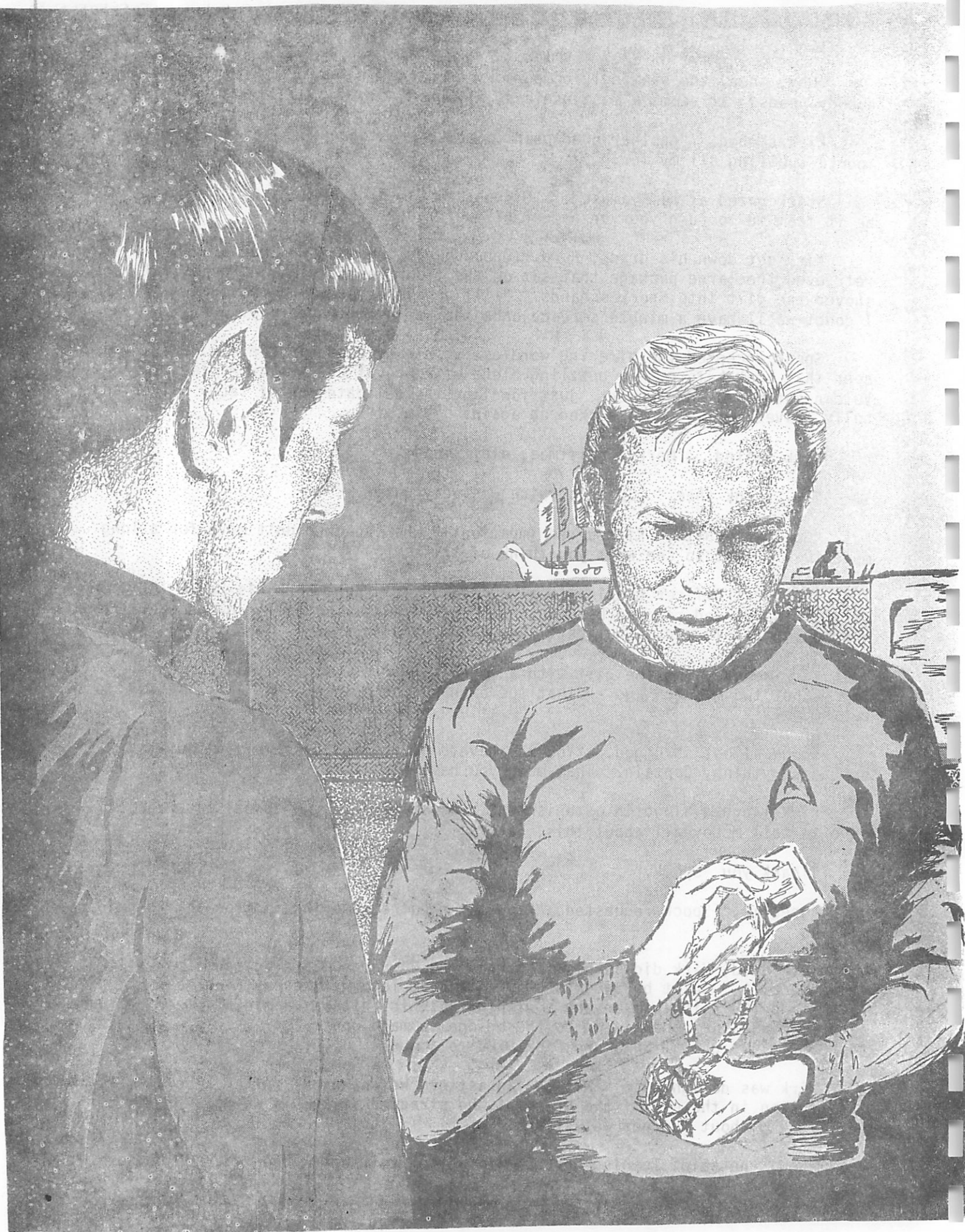
"Thank you, Spock."

"Open it," Spock requested. "You may require some instruction in its proper use."

Intrigued, Kirk did as he was asked. He unwrapped an electronic marvel: a "com bracelet," built by Spock's own hands, complete with everything he would need to command the ship from anywhere within the ship. It was a miniaturized communicator, translator, and tie-in to the bridge command controls. It was a gadget that could put Uhura, Sulu and Chekov out of jobs.

Kirk was delighted. "This is fantastic!" he enthused. After several minutes' instruction in the use of the bracelet, he strapped it on his wrist. It fit perfectly without further adjustment.

"Now," he said, leaning back satisfied and smiling. "Open yours. No more stalling."



Spock shot him a withering look and carefully slit open the sparkling paper. His dark eyes lit from within as he pulled the gift from its wrapping. "Jim," he whispered. He wanted to say more, but no words would come.

What he unwrapped appeared to be nothing more than a glass-like box about the size of a suitcase, filled with unidentifiable glittery innards, and sporting a color-coded control panel on one side. But to Spock's delighted eyes, it was a dream-come-true. It was a musical synthesizer, or "theorem", more challenging than the most difficult Human or Vulcan instruments. Built by a team of Vulcan engineers in cooperation with the musicians of Lleurim-mekkel, creatures known galaxy-wide for their compositional abilities, this theorem was capable of creating music from thoughts, light patterns, hand motions and ordinary conversations. Hand-constructed at the rate of only three per solar year, they went for unbelievable prices. Spock knew from past inquiries that this lapful of crystal had probably cost his Captain better than three months pay!

"Jim," Spock repeated when he had barely regained the ability to speak. For the first time in his life, the Vulcan could not think of a thing to say. He looked helplessly at Kirk, an unspoken question in his eyes.

"You're wondering how I knew you wanted this?" Kirk guessed. "Logical deduction, Mr. Spock... or, maybe I should say 'logical-keeping-my-eyes-open-for-clues' when we went window shopping on our last shore leave." Involuntarily, Kirk smiled at the memory. Spock, his nose pressed to the window of the little Orion import shop on Starbase 18, had been the picture of poignant, wistful longing. Kirk had gently herded away his friend, arguing logically that there were far more practical uses for that much money. Then he had returned, hours later, to buy the prized instrument that he knew Spock would never forget or cease to long for.

Spock realized very suddenly that he, too, was smiling. He quickly recovered, but not before Kirk had seen. The Vulcan looked up at his Captain, embarrassed.

"Jim," he began again. "Thank you."

Kirk smiled, then reached out to pat his friend's shoulder. "Don't mention it."

The Captain stood, stretched his arms over his head, and indulged in an enormous yawn. "Well," he said, "now that I've occupied all of your spare time from now until the end of the mission, I guess I'd better pack myself off to bed. Tomorrow's coming all too soon." He paused to watch as Spock activated the theorem's power cell. Clearly, his First Officer wasn't going to get any sleep tonight -- McCoy's threats notwithstanding. In a moment, Spock looked back up at him with shining eyes. Kirk took a mental picture of that look and froze it into his own memory banks for safekeeping.

"I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow, Mr. Spock. Good night."

"Good night, Jim. And... Merry Christmas."

Kirk cast a final, affectionate glance behind him as he left the room. Spock, his fatigue forgotten, had already begun to play.

Chapter 2

McCoy was halfway through his breakfast when Kirk arrived -- some twenty minutes late -- in the officer's mess the next morning.

" 'Bout time you got down here," he grumbled, looking at Kirk with concern. The Captain's eyes were ringed with dark smudges. "You look like hell. What happened? Didn't you get any sleep last night?"

Kirk shrugged as he set down his tray. There was nothing on it but black coffee. "I got enough," he replied evasively.

"Sure you did," McCoy smirked. "And so did that blonde Concillate's aide, I'll wager. What was her name?"

Kirk almost laughed. "That was just a *rumor*, Bones."

"Humph." The doctor took a sip of juice. "By the way, where's our favorite Vulcan this morning? I thought he'd be coming down to eat with you."

Kirk shook his head. "He's probably still in his quarters playing with his new theorem."

"He really liked it, huh?"

A gentle, wondering smile lit Kirk's face. "You should have seen him, Bones. He couldn't even speak."

"Wish I'd been there," McCoy smiled. Although he'd sooner die than admit it, he really did care for that crazy Vulcan. And when Spock was happy he, too, was happy. "But you still haven't answered my question," he reminded Kirk, "about the sleep."

Kirk stared into the depths of his coffee. "It's nothing serious, Doctor," he assured McCoy. "You know it's impossible to sleep on Christmas Eve."

"Terrific," growled McCoy. "You look like death warmed over... and if I know Spock, he was up half the night playing music. We're in for a real, nice, efficient day, aren't we?"

"That's not the best of it," Kirk enthused. "Look at *this!*" He held aloft the com bracelet. "Spock made it for me."

"Well, I'll be damned," McCoy whistled. "What is it?"

Within moments, the Captain and his new acquisition had drawn a crowd of curious onlookers. He was putting the device through its paces, demonstrating each of its functions, when the ship around him shuddered slightly.

Kirk was on his feet. "What was that?" Almost before the question was asked, the Red Alert sirens began to whoop.

Certain that it had been her ill-advised little pilfering expedition to the ship's hydroponics section that had set off the alarm, Svea Sanders flattened

herself, trembling, against the bulkhead as the siren screamed. The corridors outside the VIP Guest Quarters were rapidly filling with Enterprise crewmembers, many in early-morning states of deshabelle. There was no conceivable way she'd be able to make it back to her cabin unnoticed now.

Damn that Elsa, anyway, for talking her into this harebrained scheme!

A low whimper caught in her throat as she crouched down, attempting to make herself as small and inconspicuous as possible behind a stranded service bee. It was not until a long, breathless moment had passed that she realized nobody was paying any attention to her. Words like "explosion", "disaster", and "sabotage" buzzed around her.

Oh. Well, there was nothing wrong on this deck, anyway... and the rest of this dumb old ship could take care of itself. With an effort, Svea straightened, willed her knees to stop shaking, and moved as normally as she could toward the double doors that led to safety and home.

"Where have you been?" a peevish voice demanded out of the darkness. "Daddy's all in a panic over this alert and I've had to tell him a whole string of stories to cover you and now he's suspicious!"

"You think that's bad?" Svea flared, whirling on her sister. "You should have seen some of the suspicions floating around that botany lab! I'll have you know it isn't easy to take things on a starship..."

"Never mind that. You're still alive, aren't you?" Elsa shushed her impatiently. "Did you get the stuff?"

"Of course!" With a flourish, Svea produced a small plastic envelope from her bodice, filled with tiny gray-green berries. "Two handfuls!"

"Terrific. You just leave the rest to me..."

"I should have left the burglary to you..."

"... and go show Daddy you're okay before he pitches a fit."

The air in the weaponry hold reeked of cordite.

Spock stepped gingerly over the charred remains of a cannister that barely an hour ago had contained blasting caps, and knelt, pointing to what looked like a shard of black paint peeled from the side of a derelict building.

"It is fortunate indeed that this room was shielded," he said. "Note the condition of this brace. It is all that remains of the wall between this compartment and the power field surrounding the next."

Engineer Montgomery Scott knelt next to him. "Aye," he replied in an awed, hushed tone. "And the next room over houses the backup power terminals for the phaser banks. If yon wall'd been breeched, we'd be so much space dust by noo, I dinna doot it. Ye can thank the good Lord for small mercies."

Spock did not answer, but McCoy stepped over to examine the column of crumbled alloy. "I'm thankin' whoever's in charge of fools and children out here that this didn't happen fifteen minutes later than it did. If alpha shift had had time to come on, there would have been eight people down here when that blast went off -- and I'd be spending the rest of the day doing autopsies. As it were, there were just two minor injuries."

Spock nodded. "As the Captain would say, we seem to have escaped with our luck intact once again." He stood, a troubled expression clouding his normally stolid face. "However, I should very much like to know what caused Mr. Sulu's fireworks to detonate prematurely."

"You double-checked Sulu's computer program yourself, didn't you, Spock?" McCoy asked.

"Yes," the Vulcan nodded, "and there were no errors. But even if there had been, we had installed two separately coded safety overrides, to prevent what just happened from happening. It should have taken a minimum of three people who knew the codes to launch and detonate the rockets. The fact that it did not indicates a somewhat serious problem with the computers."

McCoy and Scotty exchanged glances. Spock certainly had a penchant for understatement.

* * *

He looks as worried as I've ever seen him, thought Kirk as Spock returned to the Bridge three and a half hours later. The Vulcan barely acknowledged the nod of greeting from his Captain, but strode straight to his library/science station and went to work like a being obsessed.

Kirk turned his attention to the Chief Engineer, who stood by his command chair... and had to restrain a sudden impulse to laugh. Scotty looked like a chagrined Santa Claus in his soot-encrusted suit of red -- or, perhaps more accurately, he resembled one of the pathetic creatures Grandma Kirk's old tomcat used to deliver to their Iowa farmhouse door.

Kirk hastily dismissed *that* image from his mind. "Report, Mr. Scott."

"We canna find a bloody thing wrong, sir, an' thot's thot!" Scotty folded his arms and frowned at Kirk, almost challenging him to take issue with his professional assessment. "Th' hold is a mess. Not a one of Sulu's rockets is left, but th' computer doesn't e'en show they blew. Th' program's still a-sittin' there like a virgin bride. Ah dinna ken how, sir, or why. Ah just dinna ken."

Kirk bit his lip. Damn. He'd really hoped for more than that after all this waiting. He stole a furtive glance at Sulu, who'd been dutifully -- and silently -- manning his post all morning despite the painful-looking first degree burns spotting his neck and arms, and wondered how this news would affect him. But Sulu didn't appear to have heard.

"Are we secure now, Scotty?" Kirk had to ask. "Is there any possibility of a secondary accident?"

"Och, aye, we're secure enough. That whole section's fair sealed away noo. We'll ha' no more trouble frae't. O'course, she'll be needin' th' facilities o' a good Starbase t' effect repairs..."

Kirk smiled. "I'm doing my best to get us there now," he reminded gently.

Scott blushed. "Aye, ah know, sir. 'Tis just... ye know how 'tis, sir."

Kirk nodded knowingly, well aware of his position in the Engineer's eyes. He only commanded this ship; Montgomery Scott owned her. "Of course, Mr. Scott. You'll be receiving a commendation for your efforts."

"Thank ye, sir." By this time, Scotty's face was beet red.

"Now... I want you to go shower and change and grab a bite to eat *before* you get back to your... wee barns." At Scott's distressed look, he added firmly, "That's an order, Mister!"

"*Bairns*, sir. Me wee *bairns*. Ah dinna ken how such a civilized mon as yoursel' can butcher th' English language so."

Oh. Well, all right. Whatever. "*Bairns*." Kirk shook his head. "Certainly, Mr. Scott. Dismissed."

"Aye, sir."

As the Engineer left the Bridge, Kirk looked up at the chronometer. It confirmed what his growling stomach had been trying to tell him for several minutes. Where had the morning gone? He stood.

"Mr. Spock, the con is yours. I'll be in Sickbay, then the Officer's Mess. Let me know if anything turns up on the computers."

"Of course, sir," Spock said without looking up. "Enjoy your lunch."

I plan to, Kirk thought as he entered the lift. A mid-day break with Bones was just what he needed - especially on a day like this. And... *oops!* He'd almost forgotten! He had an errand to run before joining the good doctor.

He pressed the communications stud on his new com bracelet. How about that? It was coming in handy already!

"Kirk to McCoy."

"McCoy here," grumbled the voice on the other end. "You're late again."

"I know, Bones, and I'm going to be even five minutes later. I've got a detour to make, but I'm on my way. Meet you in the officer's mess, okay?"

"Okay, but make it snappy. I'm starved."

"Right. Kirk out."

Feeling more like a kid with a new toy than an officer with a new tool, Kirk cut the connection and directed the elevator to take him to ship's stores. His 'detour' entailed retrieving a rather bulky package from a private locker

in that infrequently visited section of the ship. He dared hide a Confederate flag nowhere else.

At 1205 hours, ship's time, Pavel Chekov pressed the "go" button on his console in Rec Room Three, implementing the carefully-planned and Spock-approved snow program for which he had sacrificed a night's sleep. He pulled on his gloves and moved across the room to personally direct the placement of five hundred cubic meters of synthesized ice. Specially constructed blowers had been routed through the area's air-recycling ducts, and with the aid of a network of old-fashioned ropes and pulleys Chekov could single-handedly place every flake in its pre-ordained position.

The blowers had been designed to deliver snow at the easily controlled rate of one hundred cubic meters every half-hour. But after about twenty minutes, Chekov realized that he was not getting anywhere near enough snow out of the second and fourth ducts. In fact, he was getting only a trickle. Puzzled, he crossed back to the console and looked it over. Nothing appeared to be wrong. Chekov pressed the "input" button twice more. There, that seemed to do something. At least a little more white foam appeared.

He punched "input" again then, mystified, went back to his frozen mountain.

McCoy lifted a forkful of greenery to his lips and shivered. "Say, is it just me, or is it getting cold in here?"

"It's cold," Kirk replied, swallowing down the last of his milk. "I was just noticing it myself."

"Maybe somebody bumped the thermostat."

"I'll have a look," Kirk said. "Go ahead and eat." He rose and crossed to the indicator on the far wall. *What the devil...?* Eleven degrees Celsius and falling so fast he could see the drop...?

He headed for the door. "Bones, I'll be back in a..."

The intercom whistled. "Captain Kirk to the Bridge, please." Spock's voice sounded urgent. Frustrated, Kirk slammed his hand on the button. If what he thought was happening was happening...

"Kirk here."

"Captain, I am getting reports from all over the ship. Disturbances in life-support, temperature variations on decks six through thirteen, and..." The end of Spock's sentence was suddenly interrupted by a garbled whine, as if the intercom itself were being affected by something.

"Repeat that last, Spock," Kirk ordered, hoping he was getting through.

"... Snow, sir," the Vulcan's voice came back weakly. "The corridors on decks five-B, five-L, and in the medical laboratories..." Another pause.

"... snow reported to be up to crewmen's knees."

I don't believe this, was Kirk's first inane thought. Somebody has finally taught Spock how to play a practical joke.

"On my way," Kirk said, more out of habit than thought. "Meet me at Rec Room Three."

* * *

From somewhere beyond the roar of blowing snow, Chekov heard a siren. The distinctive whoop-whoop-whoop sent a chill up his back more thrilling than the bone-deep chill imparted by standing hip deep in a mountain of slush.

As quickly as he could on numb legs, the young Russian officer moved to his console, disengaged the program, and headed for the doors.

What he encountered there would remain etched in Chekov's memory for the remainder of his days.

Waist-deep in a drift of soggy white, and each with a caplet of frost atop his head, stood Captain Kirk, First Officer Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Chief Engineer Scott. The doctor and Spock were busily brushing snowflakes from one another's shoulders, and Scotty looked too miserable to speak. But the Captain regarded him with that very special - even famous - 'reserved for diplomatic functions' smile.

"Good afternoon, Ensign."

Chekov swallowed and sent up a silent plea to St. Peter for help. "Keptain..."

* * *

Kirk paced the briefing room floor like a caged le matya, his non-progress followed by three pairs of silently watchful eyes.

"'We don't know, sir,' isn't good enough, gentlemen," he declared loudly, bringing down his open palm with a bang on the tabletop. "I want answers, and I want them now!"

He was met by two stubbornly closed looks and one wryly uplifted eyebrow. Kirk turned away and drew a deep, steadying breath. *Get hold of yourself, James T...*

The bright holiday atmosphere had been all but ruined. Over a third of his crew were spending Christmas afternoon shoveling snow in the drifting corridors, in the company of Chekov the Mortified. The delegates of the Borgellian Concillate, faced with their second disaster of the day, were demanding his resignation. And he had just spent fifteen minutes going in circles with his seemingly ignorant senior officers.

Kirk let out the breath and turned to his last source of hope. "Spock, let me re-phrase this... Do you have any idea at all what we're dealing with?"

"No, sir," Spock answered, ignoring the open dismay on his Captain's face. He shifted uncomfortably inside the shell of heavy blankets that McCoy had wrapped

around him to ward off his core-deep chill. "We only know that in each instance, the specifically-programmed computer failsafes... failed. Mr. Scott and I have a team of technicians checking the circuitry now; they are due to report their findings to us in 18.93 minutes. However, it is highly unlikely that they will make any significant discoveries. Records indicate no physical cause for the failures -- no power surges or cutoffs, and no evidence of tampering with the terminals relative to the recreational programs."

"No evidence of tampering..." Kirk repeated softly, thoughtfully, chewing his lower lip. He looked at the Vulcan. "That doesn't necessarily rule out sabotage, does it? It means only that we aren't dealing with an amateur prankster."

"Quite correct, Captain," Spock nodded, approving the logic. "However, I must point out that it would have taken an unusually skilled individual to accomplish this... mischief... and escape leaving no trace of his or her presence."

McCoy broke in, voicing the obvious question. "Just how 'unusually skilled' an individual are we talkin' about, Spock?"

The Vulcan tried not to look *too* smug. "At the present time, Doctor, I am the only being aboard this ship in possession of that level of skill."

"Humph," Kirk snorted and resumed his pacing. "The only problem with *that* is that it takes us back to square one. The word 'mischief' isn't even written in your book!"

That ain't the way I heard it from Sarek, McCoy mused, but he kept his thoughts to himself for once -- more for the Captain's sake than for Spock's.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir..." Scott, who up to this point had listened in polite, if distracted, silence, spoke up. "... an' beggin' yours, too, Mr. Spock, but I hafta disagree wi' ya. 'Tis entirely possible thot Spock coulda been th' culprit."

A falling pin could have been heard in the ensuing silence. "What do you mean, Scotty?" Kirk asked, very quietly. As desperate as he was for input, he wasn't sure at all he wanted to hear this.

"Ahm talkin' aboot error, Captain. Call it wot ye like -- a miscalculation, or an oversight -- but it all comes doon ta simple Human error."

Spock's eyebrows shot up into his bangs. "*Human* error, Mr. Scott?" he echoed icily, incredulously.

Kirk winced at his Engineer's tactless choice of words; McCoy covered a near outburst of laughter with a timely cough. Scotty flushed scarlet.

"For lack o' a better word for it, aye," he plunged on bravely. "Ah know ye aren't Human, lad -- but ye are mortal, so far as we know. An' as unaccustomed as we may be t' the idea, ye are capable o' makin' mistakes!"

McCoy did laugh, then.

It's true, Kirk had to agree reluctantly. *We are used to thinking of Spock as infallible, of his word as fact. But that's as unfair to him as it is to us. What if, just once, Spock pulled a real boner, and none of us caught it because we didn't think to look?*



Frost '87

The Untouchables is a 1960 American television series created by Robert L. Fish. It is a black and white series that ran from 1959 to 1963. The series is set in Chicago during the Prohibition era. The main characters are the Untouchables, a group of men who are dedicated to fighting crime. The series is known for its high-contrast black and white photography and its dramatic storytelling. The series was a major success and is considered one of the best television series of the 1960s.

"Can ye swear," Scotty persisted, "thot when ye went ta bed last night, every switch thot needed ta be flipped *was* flipped?"

"Probably," McCoy chortled, "considering that he never *did* get to bed last night!" Kirk silenced him with a dirty look.

"I can, Mr. Scott," Spock insisted, once again fully composed and fully convinced of his own innocence. "There was nothing whatsoever wrong with the computers prior to 0746 this morning."

"But..."

"Gentlemen," Kirk interposed sternly before a pointless argument could get started. "It is not our purpose here to fix blame on anyone. We are seeking the cause - and the solution, if there is one - to the crisis at hand. Do I make myself clear?"

"Aye, sir," Scotty conceded, and the others nodded their assent. Kirk smiled. There were rare times in the lives of even the best commanding officers wh en it was a joy unspeakable to be surrounded by "yes-men". This was one of those times.

It came to him just how unutterably weary he must be to want any such thing. He knew beyond a doubt that he was weary of *this*. They had been here half an hour too long already. Abruptly, Kirk marched for the door.

"All right. I want any and all reasonable measures taken to prevent another occurrence... up to and including a ban on all use of the computers for non-essential purposes. Also, I want doubled security on the Rec Deck tonight for Uhura's pageant since it's the next scheduled extra event. Scotty, Spock... when your techs report in, I'll want an update. I'll be on the Bridge if I'm needed. Dismissed."

Spock continued to sit, immobile in his blankets, long after the briefing room had been deserted. Absorbed in thought, he did not even hear Lt. Blake of engineering come in behind him.

Had Scott been right? Was he somehow to blame for the day's unfortunate events? He had the sinking feeling that perhaps he was... that he had neglected to take some variable into account. If only he could focus on what it was...

"Mr. Spock?" Blake's soft voice called him back to the present. He twisted around enough to see that he was addressed by a diminutive Human female with limpid gray eyes. "I have that report on the computer circuitry you requested, sir."

Spock stood, shaking off the blankets, feeling suddenly foolish and undignified all bundled up like a cocoon. The outermost layer fell straight to the floor, still gathered around his legs, and he nearly tripped stepping out of its folds. Fortunately, Blake did not seem to notice. She extended a hand, palm up, toward him. In her hand were two tiny bits of metal.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Spock was at once curious and apprehensive. The bits of metal appeared to be melted.

"This is it, sir," Blake reported. "One came from the computer that held Mr. Sulu's pyrotechnics program, the other came from Rec Deck Three, from the snow program's console. They are - or were - microcapacitors, sir. The critical ones that guarded the safety overrides."

"These appear to have been exposed to great heat, Lieutenant," Spock said, puzzled. "Was anything else in their vicinities likewise affected?"

"No, sir. It's the opinion of Mr. Hobbs - he's my apprentice - that some kind of ultrasonic frequency did this. He said he used to see it all the time on his father's units at home..." Her voice trailed off. Spock didn't appear to be listening.

Indeed, he wasn't. He was staring into space with an expression of horrified recognition as the pieces of his puzzle fell into place.

Ultrasonics. Capacitors. Music. Snow. Fireworks. And Jim...

Ignoring the stunned Lieutenant, and cursing himself as twelve kinds of fool, Spock bolted from the room.

* * *

"Well, hello, there!" Yeoman Mayetta Lee looked up from her galley duties and beamed a welcoming smile at the two shyly inquisitive youngsters hovering just outside the door. "Come on in, I won't bite."

Svea and Elsa Sanders exchanged unreadable glances and entered hesitantly.

"What can I do for you?" the friendly yeoman inquired. "You look like a pair of lost explorers in need of a road map."

Svea giggled bashfully; Elsa nodded, blushing. "We are, sort of. This ship is pretty big."

"It can be when you're new to it," Lee nodded knowingly. "But maybe I can help. What were you looking for?"

"Well, um..." Elsa stammered. "A soda machine, or something."

"Thirsty, are you?" Lee chuckled. "Well, I'm afraid we don't have soda machines on the Enterprise, but you've found the next best thing. This is the officer's galley and I'm sure I can fix you just about anything you'd like."

The girls traded startled looks. Elsa's eyes widened. The officer's galley! What luck!

"What'll it be?" Lee asked, always willing to play hostess to thirsty explorers.

"D'you have orange pop?" Svea asked.

"Sure do. Coming right up." Lee turned her back and reached into a cooler beneath the sink. Svea turned to her sister and silently mouthed, "Get ready."

"Thank you," she said sweetly when the yeoman handed her a brimming cup. She took a sip. "Mmmnn.... good!"

Lee smiled. "I'm glad you like it." She turned to Elsa. "And what would you like, dear?"

"Um... root beer?"

"Sure thing." As the unsuspecting yeoman turned her back again, Elsa slipped a hand into the kangaroo pocket of her bulky knit sweater and withdrew a tiny vial of clear, odorless liquid.

"What exactly is an officer's galley?" Svea asked innocently, but not without a certain twinkle. "Does that mean the cups wear stripes?"

Lee laughed gaily. "Oh, it certainly *feels* like they do, sometimes." She handed Elsa her cup. "This is where refreshments are prepared for the Bridge crew, that's all."

"You mean even the Captain? And Mr. Spock?" Svea could not keep a degree of awe out of her voice.

"Absolutely," Lee smiled. "As a matter of fact, I was just working on their drinks when you came in." She gestured to a steaming pot on the warmer.

"It sure sounds like a lot of responsibility," Elsa observed casually, edging closer to the counter. "Serving the most powerful men on board, I mean."

"Well, yes, it is," Lee nodded as she lined up a row of plastifoam cups on a tray. "But you get used to it pretty quickly."

Svea was about to ask her how she remembered how everyone liked their coffee, when a long shadow fell across the doorway. Yeoman Lee looked up.

"Oh! Hello, Dr. McCoy."

The twins spun around - a bit guiltily - as a kindly looking dark-haired man stepped into the tiny cubicle behind them.

"Hello, Mayetta," he drawled pleasantly. His bright blue eyes took in the pretty Oriental woman and her two young visitors. A warm smile spread over his craggy face. "And how are *you*, young ladies? You-all are the Sanders twins, aren't ya? You-all havin' a nice Christmas?"

"Y-yes, sir," they stammered together. "Fine, th-thank you." Svea dug an elbow into her sister's ribs. *Who is this man?* her eyes asked wildly. *How does he know who we are?*

Elsa shrugged, but McCoy didn't seem to notice. "Good, good, glad to hear it." He turned to the woman pouring the beverages. "Here, Mayetta... before you do all of 'em..." He handed her a matched pair of mugs. "These are for Jim and Spock."

Lee accepted the mugs with outstretched hands. "My, aren't these pretty?" she smiled. "Oh, of course, Doctor, I'll put these to work right away!"

Svea and Elsa stared at the new mugs, dumbfounded. They couldn't believe their good fortune. They had located the right galley at the right time, and had won the

confidence of the right yeoman. Now, they were even being shown the right cup!

McCoy turned toward the door, but Svea was suddenly, unaccountably, in his path. He walked right into her, or thought he had. It made little difference in the end. The Fleet Admiral's daughter - and a full cup of sticky orange pop - hit the floor at his feet with a resounding splash.

"Aww, honey, I'm sorry...."

And then McCoy and Yeoman Lee were all over her with towels and apologies and, "Are you sure you're all right...?" while behind them, forgotten and unobserved, Elsa emptied the contents of her vial into the mug marked 'SPOCK'.

Several minutes passed before Mayetta Lee chanced to look up at the chronometer on the wall. It was ten minutes past the time she should have left for the Bridge. As McCoy hustled the embarrassed twins out the door, she hastily put together the last of her beverages... remembering extra sweetener for Mr. Sulu... and lifted the loaded tray.

Oh, Damn! She must have been more rattled by the orange-pop incident than she'd thought. Spock's elegant new mug was filled with rich black coffee - which he couldn't stand - and the Captain's mug brimmed over with lemon-mint tea. Oh, well. At least she hadn't been so rattled she hadn't noticed in time.

She dumped the contents of Kirk's mug into the sink, emptied the coffee out of Spock's mug into Kirk's, rinsed out the bitter dregs, and smoothly replaced it with fresh tea. There, no big deal. She was all set, and her two favorite officers would never know the difference.

Disappointed, Kirk eased himself down into the command chair. Damn! There had to be an explanation for what was happening, and they had to find it soon, before something *really* serious happened. This was no ordinary computer malfunction. Spock surely would have detected any glitch in his systems long ago. No... it had to be either the "simple Human error" Scotty had proposed, or - heaven help them all - the action of an unknown saboteur.

Kirk wasn't sure which of the two answers he would prefer. He was only sure that he was furious.

He glanced up at the Bridge chronometer. Yes, Scotty should have that status update ready by now.

He reached for his com bracelet.

The turbolift doors hissed open, and Spock charged onto the Bridge under full impulse power. One thought dominated his mind: Kirk's com bracelet must not be used again!

He saw Kirk's hand - moving - out of the corner of his eye.

"Jim, NO!"

But Kirk didn't hear him, or if he did, failed to heed.

Uhura looked up from her board when she heard Spock's strangled cry, and caught only a glimpse of the Vulcan before he exploded into a hurricane of motion.

The next instant, Spock had cleared the Bridge railing in a flying vault, plucked the Captain's hand out of mid-air and, driven by his own unstoppable impetus, tumbled headfirst over the Captain's shoulder (and the command chair) in a graceless somersault. The Captain, his hand still locked in the First Officer's steely grip, was yanked helplessly to the floor after him. Vulcan and Human landed together in a tangled heap.

Uhura caught her breath at the painful THUD. Kirk's breath was driven out of him in a grunting wheeze. Spock let out his breath in a sigh of thankful relief.

The bracelet had not, quite, been touched.

Eyes widened, jaws dropped, heads turned all over the Bridge. None, however, could match the Captain's look of sheer incredulity. Nose to nose with his First Officer, Kirk's eyes threatened to pop right out of his head. It was a long moment before he trusted himself to speak.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, Mister?!" he demanded, red-faced.

"Sir," Spock answered with as much decorum as he could muster while sprawled flat on his back, "please -- don't use that again!" He indicated the bracelet with a nod of his head.

Kirk lifted a querulous eyebrow. "Why not?"

"I have reason to believe that you - or rather, your bracelet - is the saboteur you seek."

"What!?" Shocked, Kirk stared dumbly first at the device on his wrist and then back at Spock. "Mr. Spock, explain!"

The Vulcan looked vaguely embarrassed. "I cannot explain at this time, Captain," he lied. "The logic involved was...extremely complicated."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. *You are a terrible liar, my friend*, he thought to Spock. Aloud, he said, "Riding a hunch, eh?"

Spock nodded slowly, reluctantly. Better to be accused of using intuition than to be accused of perjury.

There was a brief pause as the rest of the Bridge crew converged, lifted the two off the floor, and set them rather shakily on their feet. Kirk sighed and rubbed his bruised shoulder.

"All right. As far-fetched as your 'hunches' are, Mr. Spock, they're often correct in the end. And right now we have nothing else to go on. See what you can find." He gingerly unfastened the innocuous looking device from his wrist and handed it over to the Vulcan. Then, quite suddenly, he grinned.

"By the way, that was a pretty spectacular entrance you made just now," he said, sotto voce. "Sure you wouldn't like to try an encore?"

Spock drew himself up stiffly and glared down at Kirk. He found little amusement in the situation. "I did what was necessary... sir."

Kirk softened. "Of course you did, Spock. Forgive me. You never do anything spectacular, do you?" He let his friend absorb that for a moment before adding quietly, "You'd better get busy. Your work's cut out for you."

Yeoman Lee stepped out of the turbo-lift with a loaded tray. "Hot drinks for everyone," she announced, and was greeted by a murmur of welcome. She stopped first at the command chair to hand Kirk his new personalized mug. He accepted it gratefully, and she proceeded to Spock's station with the Vulcan's matching cup before moving on around the Bridge.

Kirk sipped his coffee slowly, reflecting on the day's events. It was hard to credit that so small a gadget as his com bracelet could so completely foul up the Enterprise's systems... but if Spock thought that's what it was, then...

He glanced up and happened to see the Vulcan approaching him from the science station.

"Problem, Spock?"

"No, sir... a question, if I may?"

"Of course."

"Where did *this* come from?" Spock held up his new earthenware mug.

Kirk stared at him, nonplussed. "You mean you don't know?"

"No, sir. My name is on it and my tea is in it; obviously it is mine. I, however, have never seen it before."

Kirk chuckled. McCoy had apparently given up trying to catch Spock for a formal presentation - entirely understandable on a day like today - and had simply put the gift into circulation, allowing Spock to take a guess as to its origins. Kirk smiled up at his puzzled friend, sorely tempted to let him keep on wondering for a while.

"It's from Bones," he said finally. "See? He gave me one just like it."

Spock did not look pleased. "I... see."

"What's the matter, Spock? Don't you like it? I'll admit, there's nothing Vulcan about the design, but..."

"It is not that, Captain," Spock interrupted, an eyebrow arching. "The gift is aesthetically pleasing as well as practical. I am merely concerned..."

"Concerned about what?" Kirk asked after Spock had lapsed into silence.

"Um... never mind, sir. I believe I shall heed the advice of my late grandfather, who often told me, 'If you look for trouble, it is sure to find you.' "

Kirk smiled up at him. "Your grandfather was a smart man, Mr. Spock." He winked - a rare, sly gesture meant only for the Vulcan. "Back to work, now."

"You're sure this is the place?" Svea whispered. Elsa's eyes flashed impatiently

"It has to be! It's the same lift Yeoman Lee took up with the drinks, so it's got to go to the Bridge. And there's only supposed to be one way there."

"Well, then, why hasn't he come down?"

"How should I know? Maybe he drinks slow or something."

"You'd better be right. We have to be the first, or the whole plan's lost."

"Would you quit worrying? He'll be down, I guarantee it. There was enough juice in his cup to make a thop-cat horny."

"But Vulcans aren't... "

"Shhh! Somebody's coming! Quick, look innocent!"

Kirk sighed, then yawned, set down his cup, and rubbed sleepily at his eyes. He was still shaken from the Vulcan's flying tackle; last night's meager rest now seemed a lifetime ago. "God, but I'm beat," he muttered - to himself, he thought. But when Kirk looked up, there stood Spock beside him once again, and something in the Vulcan's manner told him he had been overheard.

"Yes?" the Captain asked innocently.

Spock was not about to be dissuaded. "Jim," he said quietly, "why don't you get some sleep? I can manage both the con and the computers."

Kirk picked up his mug and took another swallow of the steaming drink. The offer was tempting, but... no. He had only two hours to go on this shift, and the coffee would wake him up in a few minutes. He shook his head.

"That won't be necessary." He yawned again, more widely.

"I will notify you, of course, if anything comes up," Spock added helpfully.

Kirk graced him with a cockeyed glance. "Do I really look that bad?" he asked, stalling for time. He took another sip of coffee. "You're the one who stayed up all night."

"Irrelevant, Captain, since you're the one who obviously needs rest."

Kirk set his jaw. "Mr. Spock, I'll decide when I need rest... and when... I... (YAWN!)... don't."

The infinite patience with which his friend surveyed him slowly gave way to thinly disguised amusement. Spock folded his arms and simply *looked* at him.

Kirk yawned again. What was that old expression about giving a man enough rope...? He knew full well that his neck was in a Vulcan noose. He managed a lopsided grin.

"Go on, Jim," Spock said, easing him out of the command chair with such a gentle push that Kirk was not entirely certain he had even been touched.

He shot the Vulcan a look of his own that said there would come a payday for all this too-too-obvious coddling of captains... and firmly stifled another yawn. "The con is yours," he conceded lamely, climbing the steps to the elevator as Spock slid into the center seat behind him.

Uhura gave her sleepy Captain a knowing wink as he stepped into the lift. He almost stepped out again when he heard her whisper, "Sweet dreams." But he didn't. He yawned instead.

Kirk reached his quarters in two more yawns, and managed to keep his eyes open long enough to pull off his boots. Only as he did so did it occur to him that something was wrong. This was no ordinary drowsiness. Perhaps he should have headed for Sickbay.

He sat down, but he could not surrender quite yet. Through the bulkhead from Spock's quarters next door came a high-frequency whine, a pitched hum that made his teeth ache, and relaxation impossible. He knew immediately what it was: the theorem, left humming since first thing this morning when Spock had raced for the Bridge in answer to the first Red Alert.

Muttering ancient and graphic Terran obscenities under his breath, Kirk heaved himself off his bunk with his last remaining bit of strength. *Damn!* He'd gotten by on less sleep than this before. What the devil was going on?

He staggered drunkenly through his bathroom, the connecting alcove, and into Spock's unlocked quarters, killed the offensive noise and turned, his head spinning.

It was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter 3

Spock sat at his library console, puttering with Kirk's bracelet, when his somber reflections were broken by a wild cry from navigation.

"Sir! A Romulan wessel, bearing eight four point four two, mark two... approaching at Warp Ten, Meester Spock!"

"Energize defense shields, ready phasers," Spock said, and his long fingers flew over the command chair's controls almost before he had seated himself there. Once again, the Bridge lights dimmed to red and the sirens began to whoop. Momentarily, the Vulcan's voice could be heard echoing throughout the ship.

"Red Alert. Red Alert. All hands to battle stations. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

Spock released the intercom button, pausing to wait for Kirk's expected snapped reply. It didn't come.

"Captain Kirk to the Bridge, please," he added after a moment.

Throughout the ship, the crew hurried to their assigned posts for the third time that day, fully armed and expecting the worst. Their oft-interrupted Christmas celebrations were, by this time, largely forgotten.

Spock stared at the screen. The Romulan ship, a golden-winged Bird of Prey, had appeared suddenly just a few light-seconds off their port side. Their ability to move in so close undetected gave credence to the rumors of great advances in cloaking techniques.

The Bird of Prey did not attack, but neither did she answer Enterprise's hail. Five tense and seemingly endless minutes passed. "No change in their status, sir," Chekov reported -- more calmly. "They seem to be just pacing us and vatching."

Spock put up a sardonic eyebrow. "Hardly surprising," he muttered. There was an appreciative chuckle from the two or three crewmembers who overheard him, and the almost tangible aura of tension eased momentarily... as Spock had intended. All right. So far, so good...

"Keep an eye on them," he ordered, and then turned around to face Uhura. Spock's major concern was closer to home. Where was Captain Kirk?

"Lieutenant, please page the Captain again."

"Aye, sir."

Another two minutes ticked by without response. Uhura's lovely face took on a faintly worried expression. "Shall I key in his cabin, sir?"

Spock nodded, hopefully sharing her unvoiced opinion that the Captain must be very soundly asleep indeed. He *had* looked unusually tired... But as he peered down at the small viewscreen on the arm of the command chair, Spock's calm puzzlement gave way to real concern. Jim was not in his quarters.

The Vulcan furrowed his brow. This was most peculiar. He ordered the Captain paged a third time. He would have gone to search for Kirk himself if the Romulans had not been hovering so nearby, but *kaiidth!* What was, was. After a quick double-check with Sickbay, Spock called Security.

"Chief Kentii here, sir," came a very young-sounding voice.

"Mr. Kentii, effective immediately, institute a shipwide class-A search for Captain James T. Kirk. He seems to be... missing."

There was a pause at the other end of his connection, and murmured voices. Kentii came back, his voice frankly incredulous. "Did you say the *Captain*, sir?"

Spock swallowed his impatience; such a reaction might be expected to such an unusual request. "Yes, Mr. Kentii," he replied calmly, "I said the Captain."

There was another brief pause, then a faint, "Aye, sir," and the connection was cut off from Security's end.

Searching a ship the size of the Enterprise for an object the size of a Human being -- particularly *one* Human being out of nearly 500 -- could be compared to searching through a whole barnful of hay for a very small needle. There were endless possibilities on every deck... places where a body could hide or be hidden. A class-A search began with the obvious: the chapel, the botanical gardens, the science labs, the galleys, the laundry, the mess halls, the brig, the shuttle bays and transporter rooms, the storage bays, and the massive Rec Deck with its anti-grav playgrounds, swimming pools, changing cubicles and conversation pits. It proceeded from there to the less obvious: the labyrinthine maze of passageways through the Engineering section, the access corridors and twisting hallways lined with lockers, the utility pods, and the crawl spaces between hulls. This much of the search alone took anywhere from ninety minutes to three hours, depending on the number of personnel and tricorders involved. And in the rare instance that this much effort proved fruitless, a class-A search went on to the crew's private quarters (an invasion of privacy not undertaken lightly), the acres of space between decks, and the dozens of chutes and ducts that ran throughout the ship for every purpose from air recycling to garbage disposal.

There was little anyone on the Bridge could do but sit and wait -- and hope.

Dr. McCoy came onto the Bridge a few minutes after the search had passed through Sickbay. He stood by the command chair and surveyed the Vulcan seated there for a long moment.

"Worried?" he asked bluntly.

"Concerned, Doctor." He didn't *sound* concerned, at least to McCoy's ears.

"Where do you think he is?"

"If I had an answer to that, Doctor, I would not have begun a shipwide class-A search," the Vulcan replied, maddeningly cool.

"Well, where is he *supposed* to be, then?" McCoy exploded. "I assume you know that much or you wouldn't have the con. It is still his watch, isn't it?"

Spock actually sighed. "I sent him down to take a nap, Doctor... shortly before the Red Alert. Apparently he did not get much sleep last night."

"Uh-huh," McCoy nodded, rocking on the balls of his feet. "So I heard." Before Spock could reply, he turned and focused his attention on the viewscreen, where the Bird of Prey hung in awesome silence. "You know what I think?" he said suddenly. "I think those Romulans out there have kidnapped him!"

Spock lifted the wrong eyebrow. "Oh?"

McCoy glared at the Vulcan whose very manner suggested that the doctor's idea could be called peculiar at best. "Well, doesn't it strike you as a little odd that Jim disappeared just about the same time they showed up?"

Spock conceded wearily that it did. "However, I find your theory highly improbable," he said. "To my knowledge, the technology required to pluck one specific Human out from among hundreds is quite beyond the Romulans."

McCoy made a sour face.

"I think it much more likely," Spock continued quietly, "that the Captain has met with trouble right here on the Enterprise."

"You *do* think he's in trouble?" McCoy blanched, then scowled. "And you're not worried?"

"Worry is an unproductive waste of mental energy, Doctor," Spock said, quoting the text of his earliest lessons in control. He did not add that he was, at that moment, wasting mental energy as if his life depended on it.

"Why, you..." McCoy balled his fists in impotent rage. But his building tirade was cut short by a call from Security.

Sixty-eight minutes into the search, the red-faced and sweat-soaked Security chief chimed back in only to report the failure of phase one. Captain Kirk had not been found in any of the obvious or not-so-obvious places.

A murmur of speculation floated around the Bridge. Although he gave no outward sign of his distress, a cold chill crept down Spock's back. *Jim...*

"Implement phase two, Mr. Kentii," he ordered tightly.

"Aye, sir."

Spock had no sooner switched off the intercom than Uhura cut in urgently. "Mr. Spock, I'm getting something on subspace channel two. It's...it's the Romulans, sir."

"On screen, Lieutenant."

The Bird of Prey in the starfield dissolved, and was replaced by a face. Eyes widened all around the Bridge, and even Spock sat up a little straighter in his seat. The face on the screen belonged to no Romulan *they* had ever seen.

It was a round face, pinkish in hue, oddly pleasant in countenance. The lower half of the face was obscured by a neatly trimmed mustache and fluffy beard of snowy white. The hair that wisped across the high forehead was also white, as were the bushy slanted eyebrows. Ears fully as pointed and as elegant as Spock's own lifted away from the sides of his head, giving their wearer a wickedly elfin air. Bright blue eyes twinkled merrily as the alien took in the staring Enterprise crew on *his* viewscreen.

"To whom have I the pleasure of speaking?" the alien asked in clipped Federation Basic.

"I am Commander Spock, of the United Starship Enterprise. And who, may I ask, are *you*?"

The bushy eyebrows shot up in a gesture so like Spock's that McCoy blinked. "Why, I am Kris Kringle, of course!" came the answer and, at that, *everyone* blinked. Spock scowled, searching his memory. Why was this man so... familiar?

"Tell me, Commander Spock," the alien demanded suddenly, "have you been behaving yourself lately? Hmmm?"

Spock raised an annoyed eyebrow. "I do not see where that is any of your concern," he answered stiffly. "State your business, Mr. Kringle. Your presence in Federation territory could be construed as an act of war."

"War? Nonsense!" Kringle pshawed impatiently. "I saved you from a Romulan attack, didn't I? How could my intentions be anything but peaceful?"

"You follow us in a Romulan warship," Spock said, not exactly accusing, "and your physical appearance suggests at least some link of ancestry..."

"And you suspect a trick, is that it?" Kringle chortled. "Ah, my friend, I'm no more a Romulan than *you* are! I'm just a jolly old elf. And as for this 'warship' I've borrowed... let me assure you, it's been thoroughly pacified. Ho-ho... along with all of its crew, too. Ho-ho-ho! They were about to blast you out of the skies, Mr. Spock. Stopped 'em just in time! Ho-ho-ho!" Kringle's none-too-sober voice dissolved into merry laughter.

Spock's scowl deepened. The alien's story was plausible enough so far, but... "Why have you hailed us?"

Kringle looked genuinely surprised. "I thought I could be of assistance. You dear people have had your share of difficulties today."

"Thank you, Mr. Kringle, but we require no assistance," Spock declined politely. "Our difficulties are completely under control."

"Like hell they are," McCoy hissed, too softly for Kringle to overhear and too pointedly for Spock to ignore. "But I suppose Jim's disappearance poses no difficulty for you, does it?"

"Doctor, please..." Spock began, but was interrupted by another hearty, "Ho-ho-ho," from the alien on the screen.

"Wonderful!" he cried. "Well, then, people of the United Starship Enterprise, let's get down to business! Tell me what you'd like for Christmas...?"

A number of the crew turned to Spock, as if seeking permission to answer the friendly query. Coldly ignoring them all, Spock addressed Kringle once again, his voice hard. "Kringle, I repeat, state your business. This is a military vessel on active duty. We have no time for your illogical foolishness."

The smile faded from the rosy face. "Commander Spock, Christmas *is* my business. It is *you* who are wasting time. Now, if you'll kindly answer my question..."

"What I want," Spock said shortly, "is a rational explanation, if you please."

"Now, Spock," McCoy chided from the sidelines, "that's no way to talk to ol' Santa Claus."

From somewhere to his right came a decorously stifled giggle. Spock's back went stiff. "I do not believe in Santa Claus," he said scornfully.

Uhura's board beeped. It was a call from Sickbay; Ensign Brill of Security had taken a fall and Dr. McCoy was needed right away. The doctor said a word and stalked off the Bridge. " 'M always missin' all the fun.... "

On the screen, Kringle shook his head sadly. "Children today are so cynical," he mourned. He looked intently at Spock and decided, "Guess I'll just have to prove myself to you."

Before Spock could open his mouth to protest or order defensive action, a change came over the Bridge of the Enterprise. The whooping Red Alert sirens had long since been cut off, and there had been quiet. Now the air was filled with sweet strains of music. The dim red emergency lights began to glow brightly with every color imaginable. The mouth-watering scent of freshly baked gingerbread wafted out of the air-recycling ducts... and all around the domed ceiling, festooning the main screen, and over each duty station, hung fragrant boughs of evergreen tied with gay ribbons!

The crew sat in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Convinced yet, my skeptical friend?" Kringle chuckled from the screen.

Spock shook his head even as everyone else nodded theirs. "You have demonstrated remarkable telekinetic abilities, but that is all. We have encountered other races with similar powers. You have proven nothing about your identity."

"Hmmm... I see." Kringle paused for a long moment, his face a study in concentration. Then, "What will it take to convince you?"

Spock shifted in his seat. He was growing insufferably tired of this. "Why must I be convinced?" he asked at last, keeping firmly in mind something Jim had pointed out to him long ago: it is better to trade words for ten minutes than to trade bombs for ten seconds.

"Because once you are, you will be happy."

"Happiness is an alien emotion to me, sir. I am a Vulcan."

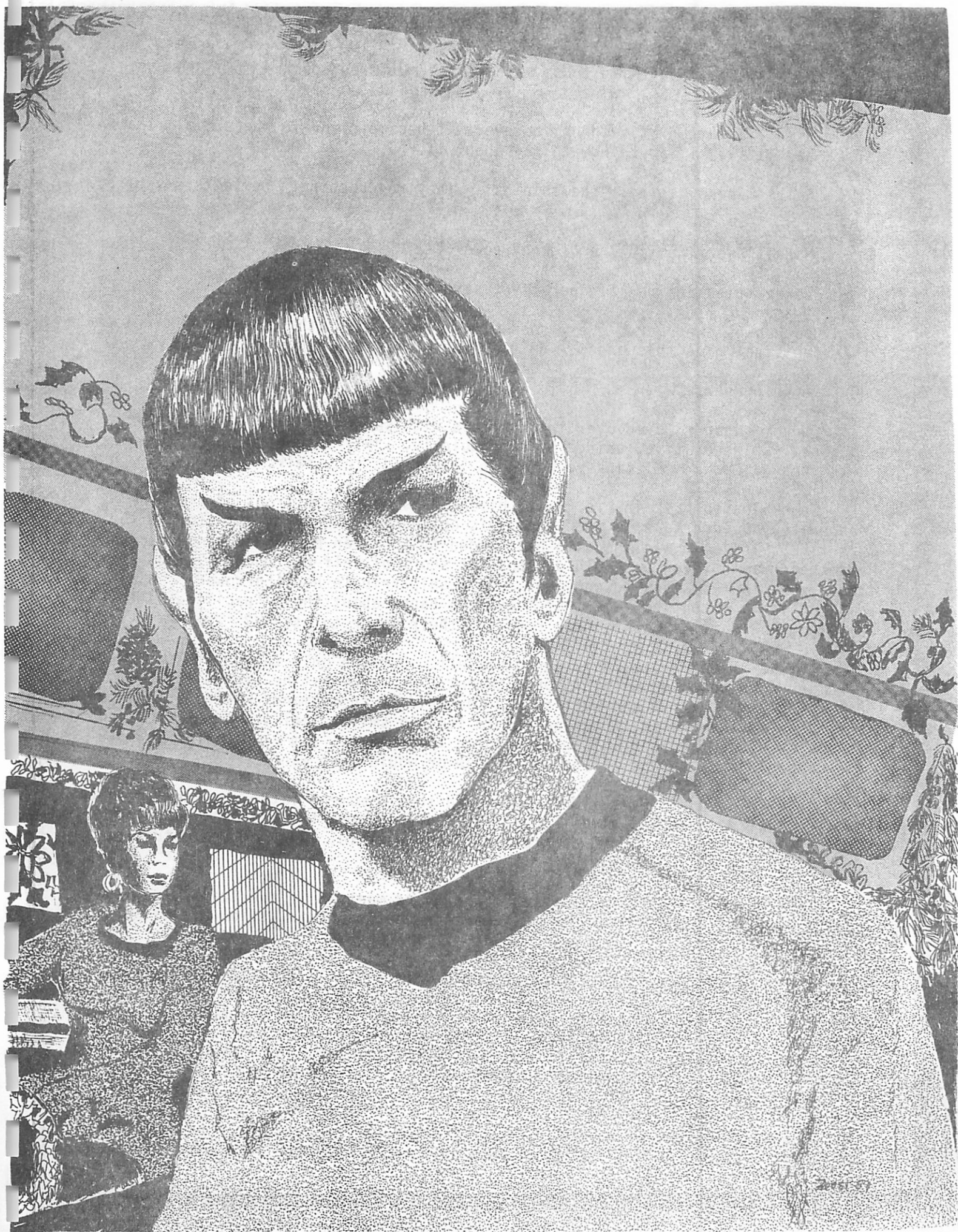
"Oh, come now," Kringle laughed openly. "You were happy enough to stay up all night playing with that music-box your friend gave you!"

Spock's face turned gray. "How do you know that?"

Kringle shrugged. "I wouldn't be Santa Claus if I didn't. I know all sorts of things. I even know about the thirty-two children on board your ship who are looking forward to a visit from old Saint Nick. So with your kind permission, I'll just bring myself and a couple of assistants over, and... "

"Permission denied," Spock said flatly. "Regulations clearly state..."

"Nonsense!" Kringle dismissed the argument with a wave of his gloved hand. "I write the regulations on Christmas Day! I'll be there in fifteen minutes -- with goodies for everyone!" Abruptly the screen went dark.



"Not if I have anything to say about it," muttered Spock. "Full power to deflectors."

In only a matter of seconds, however, it became clear to one and all that Spock had little, if anything, to say about it.

"Sair!" Chekov cried, "the shields -- they're dropping! Deflectors ineffective!"

"Manual override, full emergency power."

Chekov tried again. "Inoperative, sair."

Spock swallowed hard. He wished with all his might that Jim were here to make this decision, give this order. No time for that now, though...

"Fire phasers."

Chekov's hands moved over the controls with sure swiftness... but nothing happened. "Inoperative, sair," he said quietly. "All weapons are off-line." He turned to Spock. "I tink ve hef been 'pacified' too, sair."

Spock leaned back in his chair, his hands steepled in front of him. He desperately needed to stop and think; his options were running out along with his time. The ship was about to be invaded by an alien being of unknown powers, and there was nothing he could do about it short of self-destruction. And then, there were the Romulans to consider, whose ship Kringle had 'borrowed.' Spock did not for a moment believe that they were happy about their 'pacified' situation. How long would it be before they regained their power to attack?

Think. *Concentrate*, he ordered himself. But the only thought that came to mind had nothing to do with his predicament. He knew what he wanted for Christmas! He wanted Jim... alive and well and on the Bridge, in command, where he belonged. More than anything else, Spock wanted to see his smile, feel the touch of his hand on his shoulder, and hear his gentle voice in his ear. Jim -- his friendship, his companionship -- was all he wanted now or would ever want.

Spock closed his eyes. When he opened them a moment later, he knew precisely what he must do. It was almost as if Jim had whispered the instructions. He would welcome Kringle aboard as graciously as possible, and 'let the situation ripen'... as Kirk would say.

He stood. "Lieutenant, have an honor guard meet me in the transporter room in ten minutes. Secure from general quarters, but maintain yellow alert. Mr. Sulu, take the con."

A chorus of "Aye, sirs," sounded behind him as he left the Bridge.

The Vulcan leaned heavily against the elevator wall for a moment as the lift descended. He felt unexpectedly -- and terribly -- fatigued himself. The pace today had been hard, with barely a moment to breathe between crises. It had not been the restful holiday any of them had hoped for. He regretted not getting more sleep last night.

The lift stopped at Deck 5, officer's country. Spock hurried toward his quarters to change out of the grimy duty uniform he had been forced to wear since

early that morning. Despite his preoccupation, he could not resist a momentary pause as he passed the forced and re-sealed doors of the Captain's cabin next to his own. *Jim, where are you?* he wondered. *What has become of you, t'hy'la?*

Wondering about Jim's whereabouts only lead to worry, however, and there was no time now for such indulgences. Still, it was difficult *not* to wonder. The Captain would not have failed to respond to the Red Alert unless he were somehow *unable* to respond. Unbidden images of his friend lying in a bloody puddle somewhere between decks teased at the back of Spock's mind. He promptly squelched them with Vulcan mental controls, but it was becoming increasingly hard with each passing minute.

Spock was scarcely through the doors of his own cabin when a subliminal sense of -- something? -- set off an alarm in his head. He froze, and with quick eyes scanned the darkened room. At first glance, everything seemed normal: desk, chair, microreader, tapes, granite meditation stone, bunk, his new theorem... there! *OH, NO!... There!*

Almost completely hidden by the bed-alcove's dark drapery, a still form lay huddled on the floor by the theorem's stand. Spock could feel his heart stop and start again. He swallowed hard. The figure on the floor wore command gold.

"Captain!"

Spock was across the room in two strides. He jerked away the ornate velvet hangings and dropped to his knees beside his friend, gingerly rolling the limp body over and feeling at the throat for a pulse.

"Jim?"

Yes! The pulse was there, although dangerously slow for a Human. And breathing? Yes, again. Spock could feel the gentle rise and fall of the broad chest under his hands. He allowed himself an enormous sigh of relief, only then realizing that he had been holding his breath for nearly a minute. He carefully eased his Captain onto the narrow bunk and then went to the intercom.

"Spock to Sickbay."

"McCoy here."

"Doctor, I have found the Captain in my quarters. He is unconscious. Please come quickly."

"On my way."

Spock hit another switch. "Spock to Security."

"Chief Kentii here, sir."

"The Captain has been located, Mr. Kentii. Discontinue your search, and..."

"Yes, Mr. Spock?"

The Vulcan paused. He had no idea yet *how* Kirk had come to be here, or what had caused his present condition. If indeed foul play had been involved...

"Send an armed guard to my quarters on the double. Spock out." That would forestall any further attempts before they got started.

"Aye, sir."

Spock returned to the bed. "Jim?" he tried again, this time gently slapping the Captain's face. "Jim, wake up."

Kirk moaned softly, tossing his head. His eyelids fluttered, but the effort of opening his eyes seemed to be too much for him. After a moment, he stopped trying.

"Jim, it's Spock. Can you hear me? Try to wake up, Captain."

This time there was no response. Gently, Spock smoothed back the ever-present lock of unruly hair from Kirk's forehead. An apprehensive knot began to form in the region of his stomach, but he slammed the sensation away ruthlessly. Apprehension was illogical. Besides, there was simply no time for it.

The door slid open and McCoy bounded in, tricorder whirring. Following on the Doctor's heels was the security guard, his hand resting easily on his holstered phaser.

"Over here, Doctor," Spock directed. To the guard, he said, "Stand by."

McCoy leaned over the quiet body. "Hmnn. Uh-huh..." After a moment, he looked sharply at his tricorder readings and then up at Spock, who was hovering nearby, trying unsuccessfully to hide his anxiety.

"Knockout drops of some kind." McCoy fished in his bag for a hypo, found it, and dialed up an antidote.

"Doctor?"

"Somebody's slipped him a micky, Spock. A mighty strong one, too."

Spock swallowed the lump in his throat. "He *will* be all right?" McCoy emptied the hypo into Kirk's shoulder and straightened up, easing the kink out of his back. He looked suspiciously at the somewhat rumpled Vulcan. "Yeah, he'll be fine. Question is, will *you*?"

Spock's face straightened abruptly and he glared at McCoy, almost daring him to say another word. The good doctor needed no telepathy to read the thoughts behind that look. He hastily changed the subject, glancing around the mysterious looking room. "You found him in here, you say...?"

"Yes, I found him on the floor, where you are now standing. The bedcovers must have hidden him from visual search, and the theorum's harmonic field shielded him from tricorder scan."

McCoy sighed. "Well, thank God we found him, anyway."

"No deity was involved, Doctor," Spock said as he crossed to the closet and pulled out a fresh dress uniform. "If you feel compelled to thank someone for these fortunate circumstances, perhaps you should thank me. I found him."

McCoy glowered. "Thank you, you cold-blooded hobgoblin? Why, I'd rather..." He broke off and glanced down at the figure on the bed. Jim's words came back to him: 'Be *nice* to him, Bones.' Well, he certainly hadn't done much of that today, had he? He sighed. "Okay, okay, I'll thank you, then! And I don't care who you thank, just so long as you're thankful!"

Spock shouldered out of his dirty shirt. "Believe me, Doctor, I am," he said sincerely.

"I still wonder what he was doing in here," McCoy said, running the tricorder over Kirk's chest. "I thought you said you sent him down to take a nap...?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "Obviously he got one." He turned to look down again at Kirk, who was once again tossing on the bed. "Will he be functional soon?"

"I don't know," McCoy hedged. "I've never actually observed the effects of this drug on the Human nervous system." He bent down and rested a steadying hand on Kirk's shoulder. "It may take several minutes before he regains all of his coordination."

Spock nodded. "Very well. Unfortunately, I cannot stay." He zipped up the fastening of his jacket and straightened the sleeves. "We have company."

"You don't mean...?" McCoy's eyes widened.

"Yes." The Vulcan started for the door, then paused, looking back over his shoulder. "And if you would, Doctor, attempt to discover the party responsible for this humorless little prank."

McCoy glanced down quickly at his tricorder. "Well, that ought to be fairly easy, Spock," he muttered -- but Spock had already gone. McCoy stared after him briefly and then smiled to himself. "Yes, indeed."

The chemical that had knocked out Kirk was a rare one, derived from an ever-green plant native to only one planet in this sector of the galaxy: Borgel, the home planet of their guests.

That's odd, McCoy thought, *and then, it's not so odd*. Except for the usual political quarrels and demands for better security, the entire Borgellian Concillate had been pretty quiet this trip. Most members, including the Admiral himself, had kept to themselves and kept out of the way -- even through all the day's disasters.

How could they possibly have known what devilment their children had been up to? McCoy was pretty sure they didn't know, and he was equally certain they'd *like* to. Within moments, he had paged Security again, requesting the presence of the Admiral at the awakening of the Captain.

When he returned to the bed, he found Kirk rubbing his eyes, blinking at the ceiling. McCoy aimed the scanner at him again. "How do you feel, Jim?"

Kirk groaned and sat up slowly. "Awful." He peered around at the First Officer's quarters. "How did I get in here?"

McCoy fixed him with a stare. "You tell me."

Kirk shook his head as his clouded memory cleared. "I don't... oh, yes... the theorem. Spock left it humming. I came in to turn it off." He spotted the Security man at the door. "What's going on, Bones?"

McCoy grinned. "Well, Captain, you just napped your way through a Red Alert..."

Kirk staggered to his feet. McCoy took him by the shoulders and firmly pushed him down again. "Stay put. You're not going anywhere."

"I slept through a Red Alert? Bones, that's impossible!"

"Not when you've been drugged, it isn't."

"Drugged?" Kirk's eyes widened and he tried to stand up again. McCoy's physical presence prevented him. "What happened, Bones? Why the Red Alert?"

"Well, you see, there was this Romulan ship..."

"Romulans! Oh, my God! Where's Spock?" Kirk demanded.

"Spock? Oh, he's with Santa Claus."

"Santa Claus? Are you out of your mind? Bones, let me out of here!" Kirk bounced to his feet a third time, only to be gently restrained by the Doctor.

"You're not going anywhere, Captain. Doctor's orders. Why, look at you! You can't even stand up!"

"I could if you'd get out of my way!"

Their battle of wills was cut short by Admiral Sander's entrance. "May I ask what this is all about?" the big man asked in a voice as cold as ice. "Why have I been dragged down here in the middle of my supper like a common criminal?"

"We thought you could help us with a little problem, Admiral," McCoy began.

Sanders listened quietly as McCoy outlined the events of the past several hours for him, then explained the information that his tricorder had given him about Kirk's knockout drug. When the name of the drug was mentioned, to everyone's surprise, Sanders began to laugh.

"I fail to see the humor in this," Kirk snapped.

Sanders sobered quickly. "Of course, of course. Captain, Doctor, my apologies to you both. You are right, there is nothing funny about what happened today, but... I'm afraid you don't understand... about the drug."

"Enlighten us, please," McCoy said thinly.

"The substance you were given, Captain, was very probably not intended to put you to sleep. It was intended to make you fall in love!"

Kirk stared in disbelief; McCoy scowled. "A love potion? That stuff?"

"Yes. The young folk of our world have been using it that way for centuries. It is supposed to make one... desirous... of the first being to touch the user after the drug has entered the system. It probably reacted differently on you

because you are not of our kind. Or possibly you received too much... it takes very little."

The Enterprise officers absorbed this bit of information in stony silence, then exchanged meaningful glances. Slowly, Kirk rose to his feet.

"Admiral," he said very quietly. McCoy's ears perked up; he knew that tone all too well. "I am not particularly interested in whatever effect this drug was *supposed* to have on me. The fact is, it incapacitated me... while we were under a Red Alert, near enemy territory. You are aware, I'm sure, that a lot of very peculiar things have been happening on my ship today. I have not yet ruled out the possibility that an enemy agent may be aboard. I now have a signature to put to one of these strange incidents, and you can bet your last bottle of ale that I'll be looking for signatures on the other events as well. I hope you understand what I'm saying."

Sanders lifted his head. "Don't threaten me, Kirk. I may be about to retire, but I'm still your superior officer." He looked away, then said very softly, "It is too late to wish that I had also been a superior parent." He returned his icy gaze to the two officers before him. "I must admit, it's painfully clear whose 'signatures' are on this unfortunate event. If you can grant me an hour or two, Captain, I believe I can put an end to this nonsense."

Kirk nodded. "Granted, sir. I only hope you're on the right track... since apparently Spock *wasn't*."

Kirk saw the Admiral to the door, then turned to McCoy. "Have I your permission to resume my duties *now*, Doctor?" he asked sarcastically.

"I'm surprised you ask," McCoy answered in kind, "but if you want my professional opinion, as long as you're walkin' and talkin', you're already twice as functional as half the people aboard this ship."

That doesn't speak very well for the state of my crew, Kirk thought, as he headed out the door without another word.

Chapter 4

No sooner had Spock's honor guard assembled in the Main Transporter Room than a frantic call came in from the Shuttle Bay.

"Mr. Spock! Somebody! Help!"

Spock slapped the intercom switch, suppressing a most un-Vulcan curse. *What now?* "Spock here, Crewman. What seems to be the problem?"

"Ensign Cramer, sir, in the Bay Control area. Mr. Spock, I have *not* been drinking, but... you wouldn't believe what I just saw! There's a... a craft of some kind down here... it came in right through the bulkheads, sir. Just flew in, like one of our own shuttlecraft... only the spacedoors were closed! And nothing got damaged, either. I've never seen anything like it, sir!"

"Can you describe this craft to me, Ensign?"

"Well, it's *red*, sir, and... about half the size of a shuttlecraft, only open on top... and it has some kind of skids or runners beneath it. And there are... eight little brown animals harnessed to the front of it."

There was a long pause. "Are you certain your description is complete, Ensign?" Spock asked. "Are there no... passengers aboard this craft?"

Ensign Cramer's voice was indignant. "I know what you're thinking, Mr. Spock, but I swear I'm not drunk. I haven't touched a drop! It's exactly like I told you, sir..."

"I don't doubt your word, Mr. Cramer," Spock said almost gently. "Please answer my question."

"Uh, yes, sir...there's somebody in there. No, wait, he's getting out now."

Spock gestured to his men. "Go! Intercept and apprehend the alien!"

Over the intercom came a loud crash, followed by a distant shout: "HEY, YOU! COME BACK, YOU CAN'T GO IN THERE!" and then, ominous silence.

Kirk tried to ignore the stares of the beta-shift Bridge crew as he stepped out of the turbolift. In his rumpled clothes, tousled hair and five o'clock shadow, he felt at a decided social disadvantage. In fact, he felt a bit more like a curbside wino than a Starship commander just at the moment... and it didn't help that his personal physician was hovering over him like an expectant vulture.

He was still far groggier than he had let on to McCoy. The smell of gingerbread and the sight of all that greenery nearly knocked him over.

Behind Kirk, McCoy whistled softly. He hadn't seen the Bridge's glamorous transformation, either. For a long moment they both stood like goggling tourists on the rim of the Grand Canyon.

"Bones, you didn't tell me about *this*..." Kirk whispered.

McCoy, for once, could think of no snappy comeback. He shrugged helplessly.

"Captain," a soft voice interrupted. Kirk turned to find Uhura still at her post -- an hour overtime. "Welcome back, sir."

"Um... thank you, Lieutenant." Kirk covered quickly. "You're still on duty...?" It was not quite a question.

"You were missing, sir," Uhura said with a tiny smile, as if that explained it all. And it did.

"I... appreciate it," Kirk smiled, a little sheepishly. Somehow, his crew's devotion to his welfare amazed and embarrassed him. Most of the time, he didn't think about it; when he did, as now, he blushed.

"I'm back now. You can go, Uhura."

She nodded dutifully and began to rise. Just then, a light flashed urgently on her board. "We're being hailed by the Romulans, sir. I'd... better stay."

"Yes, please do." Suddenly all business, Kirk moved down to the command chair and replaced the duty officer seated there. "Open a channel."

"Aye, sir."

The picture on the viewscreen wobbled momentarily, and Kirk found himself staring up at one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

By the time Spock and his beleaguered honor guard caught up with Kringle, the elusive alien was thoroughly engrossed in a steaming plateful of haggis and skirlie. Spock's empty stomach turned at the sight.

Kringle laughed merrily at his expression of distaste. "Oh, you'd be surprised how tired a man can get of milk and cookies over the years," he said cheerfully. "Believe me, Commander Spock, this is a most refreshing change!"

Spock could not force a reply past his constricted throat, but he didn't have to. Seated beside the rotund Kringle, Montgomery Scott beamed with delight and refilled the alien's glass with the finest Highlander's brew he could find to offer.

"There ye go, laddie," he smiled approvingly. "Ah've always said ye could tell a good mon by how he takes t' haggis an' Scotch -- no matter th' size an' shape o' 'is ears!" He grinned up broadly at Spock, and winked.

Spock attempted to cover his revulsion with a stony expression. "Mr. Scott, explain yourself. Why did you not inform us that Kringle was down here?"

Scott looked surprised. "Ah dinna know ye were lookin' for 'im, lad." He hoisted the bottle of Scotch, prepared to pour another round. "Ah figured th' least ah could do would be t' show th' gentleman a bit o' Federation 'ospitality!"

The Vulcan stared at the Engineer, appalled by what he considered gross irresponsibility. The ship's great Rec Deck milled with crewmembers, Borgellian diplomats, and children. If Kringle's intentions were any less than honorable...

He shuddered. Clearly Scott did not understand the danger. Spock tried again.

"Mr. Scott, this 'gentleman' is an alien entity, aboard the Enterprise without invitation. And although he claims to be of benign influence, he has effectively disabled the ship's defense systems while we are within firing range of a Romulan warship!"

Scotty responded, but it was not with the indignant outrage Spock had expected. There was outrage all right, but it was directed at Kringle's Vulcan accuser!

"He's no such a-thing!" Scotty stormed, rising to his feet. "This mon's th' original Father Christmas, an' he's here by th' invitation o' every Human aboard!"

"He is dangerous... "

"He's given lovely things t' every child down here... ah dinna ken wot ye mean 'dangerous', Spock. Just because ye don't... "

Spock refused to listen to any more. His good and gracious intentions had evaporated in the heat of the chase, and right now all he wanted to do was get Kringle off the ship and Scotty into the brig -- or the Sickbay drunk tank.

"Mr. Scott, you are inebriated. Consider yourself relieved of duty at once, and report to Dr. McCoy for treatment."

Scott's right eyebrow twitched upward in an uncanny imitation of the Vulcan. Instead of leaving, however, he reseated himself and poured yet another glassful of fragrant amber liquid.

"Wi' all due respect, Mr. Spock," he grinned, "ma duty shift ended aboot two hours ago. Ah'm off th' clock, sir, an' barrin' another Red Alert, there's not a thing ye can do aboot it if ah wanta get drunk on Christmas Day. *Sir!*"

★ ★ ★

Aboard the Bird of Prey, the beautiful woman was frowning. T'chria l'nesn, the twenty two year old Commander of Remus' Pride, sat down with liquid grace and tucked her coal-black hair behind her ears. She would try again to get more of the Federation ship's handsome Captain Kirk than a calculated, if disarming, smile.

"I will not bandy words with you, Human," she said in a deceptively soft alto voice. "You have the alien who is called 'Kringle'. Return him to us now, or we will blow you out of space."

The legendary Human on her screen peered at her speculatively, and T'chria felt something tighten in her gut. *Why?* she raged silently at the stars, *Why, of all the beings in the Federation did I have to cross this one on my first command?* Kirk's reputation as a formidable opponent preceeded him even here; still, the Emperor had not given this ship to one so young without good reason. Perhaps even Kirk could be outbluffed.

"You have ten of your minutes, Kirk."

"I only hope you know what you're getting yourself into, Commander," Kirk replied smoothly. "Fire on us in Federation space and you'll start an interstellar war."

"War has been our way for centuries. We do not fear it."

"Your government's been avoiding it for thirteen years. Is Kringle worth that much to you?" Again, Kirk flashed that heart-melting smile. "If I were you, I'd give some thought to how my name would be remembered by future historians."

T'chria bristled at the Human's patronizing tone. "What history will *not* forgive is a Romulan who winks at the mockery of weaklings," she snapped. "Kringle must pay for his crimes against the Empire, and he *shall* pay -- either aboard my ship or aboard yours." She paused, then added, "You now have nine point five minutes to decide whether your crew pays along with him."

Abruptly, the communication was cut off, and the screen went dark. The navigator whirled in his seat, his face pale.

"She wasn't bluffing, sir. Sensors indicate power levels rising on Bird of Prey. They will have attack capacity in another five minutes."

"Our status?"

"As it was, sir. Shields inoperative, weaponry off-line."

Kirk leaned forward. "Get Spock up here -- and Scotty, and this Kringle character: I want to know just what and who I'm dealing with!"

"Aye, sir."

Kirk slumped down in his chair to wait, hoping unreasonably that McCoy wouldn't notice his involuntary wince. His head was about to split open. Again.

Alone and disheartened, certain he was the galaxy's last stronghold of sanity, Spock sat on a folding chair by the main Rec Room's entrance. His logical duty, he believed, was to keep an eye on Kringle -- even if no one else aboard would, and even if it meant he had to sit in the eye of the hurricane. That did not, however, mean that there weren't any number of places he'd rather be.

Around him swirled the grandest bash the Enterprise had ever hosted. A long "Conga line" of crewmen and Borgellians snaked past him, feet tripping in time to riotous, deafening music. A group of lavishly costumed youngsters trooped by in the opposite direction, to an impromptu rehearsal of tonight's pageant. Tables laden with specialty foods from every known civilized world in the Federation stood at the far end of the room, surrounded by a hungry horde. And to one side of the majestic twelve-meter tree, a pair of harlequin-clad elves offered reindeer rides to any child who could call the animals by name.

A yeoman approached Spock with a welcome cupful of punch. He had only just taken a swallow when the intercom whistled. "Bridge to Mr. Spock." He rose to push the 'acknowledge' button.

From out of nowhere, Kris Kringle appeared in front of him. Uhura's filtered voice instructed him to report to the Bridge with Kringle and Mr. Scott... but Spock could not answer. Kringle grabbed him by the arm.

"Come, come, my broody friend! Let's not keep them waiting!"

Without further explanation, Kringle laid a pudgy finger alongside his redder-than-usual nose and nodded sharply. Spock did not have time to wonder before the world vanished... POP! around them...

POP!!

...Hand in hand, Spock and Kringle rematerialized in front of the command chair.

Uhura choked on her voice, mid-squeak. McCoy nearly jumped out of his skin. Spock, unbalanced by his sudden arrival, staggered to his knees before his Captain. Kirk just stared.

"What the h-- ?"

Santa smiled affably. "You rang?"

For a long moment, it was touch-and-go whether the Captain would laugh or cry. Finally, he just shook his head. Coherent thought was rapidly becoming a lost cause. He settled for extending a hand to his floor-bound First Officer.

Spock regained his dignity along with his feet, but took a moment to test the doubtful functionality of his knees. "Fascinating," he murmured at last, then looked at Kirk. "I am pleased to see you, Captain," he said with a nod. "You appear... rested."

Kirk shot him a dark look. "Yes. We'll talk about that later, Mr. Spock. Report!"

The Vulcan gallantly gestured Kringle forward. "Captain, may I present... Santa Claus?"

Kirk blinked. Was he hallucinating, or had Spock actually said... Santa Claus? He smiled dangerously, and the bearded alien smiled back.

"Would you mind telling me who you *really* are -- and what you've done to my ship?"

The twinkling blue eyes -- so like McCoy's -- surveyed him mildly. "Who I am is obvious enough, my good man... unless you disbelieve your First Officer's assessment. And what I've done to your ship is hardly worth mention... a few baubles here and there, a little magic..."

Kirk closed his eyes and counted to ten -- by fives. McCoy had warned him that Kringle might prove a tough nut to crack. "I meant, why are we not permitted to defend ourselves?"

"There is no need for defense where there is no threat, Captain."

"My instruments tell me there *is* a threat."

"Really, now?" Kringle turned and looked over the second helmsman's shoulder at the console. "Hmnn... so they do." He straightened and smiled as cheerfully as if he'd just seen spring's first robin on his windowsill. "It would seem you have a little imbalance of power here."

Kirk's jaw tightened. "You created the imbalance, Kringle. I want you to correct it. Restore our defensive capability."

Kringle laughed. "Certainly not!"

"For the love of... *why not*?" Kirk asked, a little desperately.

"Ho-ho-ho! Because it's Christmas Day!" Kringle chortled merrily.

"Four minutes," Spock put in. Kirk spared him an impatient glance.

"Men can die on Christmas Day as easily as any other..."

"Now, now, just a moment," Kringle soothed, patting the air with plump hands. "Who said anything about dying?"

"She did!" Kirk said, gesturing at the viewscreen and the golden warship there.

"And you think men won't die if I give you weapons to fight back with?" Kringle's voice was incredulous. "Oh, my dear Captain... my dear boy..." Kringle found an empty spot on the nearby life-support console and sat down, then gestured invitingly at Kirk. "Come here for a moment, James T.," he said quietly, "I want to ask you something."

For a moment, Kirk simply stared. A part of himself he couldn't reach smouldered resentfully at the loss of command, of control... but another, larger part very much wanted to trust and believe in this familiar, if unpredictable, figure. Slowly, he rose to his feet.

Across the Bridge, Spock put up a very skeptical eyebrow. Kirk looked pretty skeptical himself, but he went to stand by Kringle. He maintained a proper distance, standing stiffly, arms folded. But Kringle wrapped a cozy arm around the Captain's shoulders and pulled him closer. Kirk tried not to squirm, but it wasn't easy. He felt like an idiot. He couldn't even make himself look up when Spock drily reported, "Three minutes."

"Now tell me, James T.," Kringle requested in a low voice, pitched only for Kirk's ears, "what happens at Christmas-time if you haven't behaved yourself during the year?"

Kirk shrugged. "You don't get nice gifts."

"That's right," Santa/Kringle nodded. "Now, I know of a certain young lady in the neighborhood who has been very, very naughty. She's rude and uncooperative and won't take 'no' for an answer. You wouldn't have any idea who I might be talking about, would you?"

"I think I might," Kirk frowned. He wished Kringle would come to the point.

"James, if you were in my position, and had to choose a suitable Christmas gift for this little lady... what would you give her?"

Kirk grinned wickedly in spite of himself. "I'd put a lump of coal in her stocking!" Kringle clapped him on the back.

"Two minutes," Spock said. Kirk didn't hear him. He was staring, open-mouthed at Kringle.

"You wouldn't... !?"

"I can't think of anything *more* appropriate, can you?" the alien twinkled.

"Uhura, open a channel to that ship!" In a flash, Kirk was back in his command chair, feeling more chipper than he had any right to feel. Even Spock's doubtful, "Are you sure about this, Jim?" couldn't dampen his new enthusiasm.

T'chria answered the hail immediately. "I see you've decided to live after all," she said archly.

"He's... on his way," Kirk lied, "along with a little token of our... Christmas wishes for you and your crew."

"You have one minute to complete transportation."

"Here he comes now," Kirk said, forcibly keeping the glee out of his voice and expression. If T'chria suspected anything amiss before they could pull this off...

Kringle stood serenely by the life support bank, his eyes closed. In another moment, Spock's dark head came up from the hooded scanner with a snap. He nodded slightly to Kirk and ducked down again. Suddenly, there appeared on the Bridge of the Bird of Prey a *second* Kris Kringle, identical to the one on Kirk's Bridge. He waved teasingly at the camera.

"How did you *do* that?" McCoy whispered incredulously. The Kringle beside him opened his eyes and smiled. "No trick at all, Doctor. Santa Claus is *everywhere*. I merely gave form to another part of my spirit."

"Oh."

As the crew of the Enterprise watched, the second Santa moved forward and gently tapped the waiting T'chria on the shoulder. Startled, she leaped from her chair with a shriek.

The Romulan Bridge dissolved into chaos. While Santa-Number-Two led T'chria and her Security team on a merry chase, a cry was going up from each and every duty station on her Bridge: essential systems were jamming up and shutting down! It was only another minute before intership communications were lost.

Silence reigned for a long moment on the Enterprise... until McCoy could stand it no longer. "What's going on?" he demanded worriedly. Nobody bothered to answer him.

Spock left his scanner and stepped down to stand beside Kirk, a strangely bemused expression on his face. "Captain... Mr. Kringle... may I compliment you both on a most unique and elegant solution to our problem?"

Kirk grinned up at him. "You may, Mr. Spock. But may I add that it was Mr. Kringle who did all the work."

"I'd still like to know just what it was he did," McCoy pleaded.

Spock answered patiently, as one might answer a schoolchild. "He altered the molecular structure of their instrumentation into a crystalline form of carbon, thereby..."

"In English, Spock, for ghodsakes!" McCoy interrupted. "Tell me in English!"

Spock looked pained. "I *was*, Doctor. But to put it in *simple* terms, Kringle turned the Romulan's computers into *coal*."

"Good for nothing better than an old-fashioned heating stove!" laughed Kringle. "Nothing could be more fitting for a naughty child on Christmas Day!"

The Enterprise Bridge rocked with relieved laughter. An ear-to-ear grin split Kirk's boyish face.

"Mr. Kringle... "

"Call me Santa, please, Captain."

"All right... Santa. I owe you one. Thank you." Kirk bowed his head formally.

Santa laughed merrily. "You owe me nothing, son. It was my pleasure."

Kirk stood up. "All right, then. I, for one, vote that we adjourn to Main Rec before the party's over. Would anyone care to join me in a little..." he looked pointedly at Spock, "...debauchery?"

"Don't mind if I do," McCoy said, while Spock put on his best unsullied-Vulcan face. The deliberate innocence was not lost on Kirk.

"Oh... by the way, Mr. Spock. That wasn't bad for a spur-of-the-moment encore." Spock looked at him strangely, as if he didn't know what Kirk was talking about, so Kirk -- very obligingly -- elaborated. "Your second spectacular entrance to the Bridge." He cocked his head. "Are you planning to enter the theatre when you retire from service?"

Spock arched a haughty brow. "Captain." For a moment, Kirk thought he was going to say something more, but instead, he stretched a long finger along one side of his hawk-like nose and nodded sharply.

POP! He was gone!

"Wha -- ?" Kirk gasped. "Spock!? Where'd he go?"

"My, but he's a quick student," Santa mused. "Would you mind very much if I shanghaied him back to the North Pole? I could use an elf with his talents."

Kirk laughed nervously. "Don't tempt me. If he keeps *this* up, I might just let you have him!"

"Ho-ho-ho!" Santa patted Kirk's shoulder and changed the subject. "Were you saying something about a party?"

"I... believe I said... something along those lines." Kirk looked at McCoy. "I honestly can't remember!"

"Been a long day, Jim?" McCoy commiserated.

Kringle placed a finger by his nose and held his free hand out to the two officers. "Anyone care to take a shortcut down?" he offered.

Kirk looked a little hesitant. "Well, I... don't know. What do you think, Bones?"

McCoy backed away. "Not me, thanks. I'd rather use the transporter!"

Chapter 5

Eventually, it was just the seven of them -- Kirk and his "senior crew" -- left under the spreading boughs of the gigantic tree. After putting in an appearance at the end of Uhura's pageant, Santa and company had departed -- right through the bulkheads -- to the sound of wild applause. The exhausted children had been packed off to bed, and everyone else had drifted away, to bed or to private celebrations elsewhere. It was late enough that even Scotty was making noises about retiring with a good tech manual. All were a little limp, from shock or other causes, and all had long since abandoned dignity and chairs for the bohemian comfort of the carpeted floor.

Over against the wall, McCoy and Kirk sprawled in familiar abandon, a bottle between them, sharing a low-key conversation. Opposite them, the bedraggled Sulu and Chekov tried to lose themselves in a listless game of Twixt. Uhura and Spock strummed quiet medleys on guitar and harp, and for a moment at least, the magical peace of Christmas settled down around them all.

Kirk sipped his brandy, allowing the tranquility of the moment to permeate his being. A comfortable silence had fallen between him and the drowsy McCoy, freeing his mind to review the most recent hours of this unforgettable day...

Determined to learn the mechanics of Spock's new-found elfin powers, Kirk made a beeline for the Vulcan as soon as he arrived on Rec Deck. But halfway across the crowded room, he was stopped by Admiral Sanders and his two sheepish looking daughters.

"They've made a full confession, on tape for your records to absolve your yeoman, and will be grounded for the duration of this trip. But I've also ordered them to make an apology in person, Captain, as part of their punishment."

Kirk nodded. "Very good, Admiral. I thank you for your part in putting an end to the disasters." He turned his brightest stare on the red-faced Twins. "Well, young ladies, what do you have to say for yourselves?"

"We're sorry, Captain Kirk," Svea said. "We didn't mean to hurt you or get your ship in trouble."

"We weren't even trying to get you," Elsa explained. "We were after Mr. Spock. But... Daddy says he's no more expendable or available than you, and..." she stopped, her face flushed.

"...and we should stick with boys our own age," Svea finished for her. "Even if they are stupid and immature."

Kirk absorbed their words, and nodded slowly. "Do you think you've learned anything from this experience?" he asked.

He was a little taken aback when two beaming grins replaced the girls' sullen pouts. "Oh, yes, sir!" they cried. "We've learned the true beauty of Terra lies in Russia and the Orient!"

Kirk's eyes widened. "You don't mean..." He turned to look at McCoy, whose look of incredulity almost matched his own.

"Sulu and Chekov?" the Doctor supplied tentatively.

"Yes, sir!" Elsa gushed. "Oh, they're so... magnificent!"

Kirk turned away to hide a terrible smile. "Fickle females," he muttered, not a little disgustedly.

"Amen to that," McCoy agreed. He then steered the Captain toward the rows of chairs surrounding the stage. "C'mon, Jim. Forget them and let's catch the rest of the show."

When Kirk finally caught up with the Vulcan, he was at the refreshment tables, heaping a plate with spinach croquettes and peanut squares. Nonchalantly, Kirk joined him in the buffet line.

"Well, good evening, Mr. Spock. You're just the man I've been looking for."

"Indeed, Captain? May I assist you somehow?"

"Yes, now that you mention it," Kirk grinned and lowered his voice conspiratorially. "You can let me in on your little secret."

Spock looked down at him, puzzled. "What secret?"

"You know," Kirk winked slyly. "The 'POP!' routine. Your vanishing act."

A long eyebrow climbed into the sleek bangs. "There is no secret involved, Jim. One merely focuses one's mental energies and..." He paused, looking speculatively at Kirk. Why did he want to know?

"And what?" Kirk urged, a little too eagerly.

Keeping his face carefully blank, Spock turned away again, taking sudden interest in the cookie assortment. "It's... magic," he muttered.

"Magic!? What are you talking about, Spock? You don't believe in magic!"

Spock sighed. "I'm afraid a further explanation of the principles involved would be a waste of time, Jim. You wouldn't understand."

Kirk's eyes narrowed. "When a Vulcan says *that*, it usually means, 'It's for me to know and you to find out.'"

Spock might have smiled. "Ktmya." *Bingo.*

Kirk's face fell. "Can't you at least tell me why you won't tell me?"

Spock assumed an air of longsuffering forbearance. "Jim, the most demanding task I face as your First Officer is keeping track of your whereabouts. I see no logic in making my job any more difficult than it already is."

They selected a table as far from the center of concentrated activity as possible, but even so, Kirk had to strain to listen as Spock pieced together the story of the com bracelet and the computers for him.

"When I made the bracelet," the First Officer explained, "I failed to take into account the high-frequency harmonics generated by the theorem." Simply put, one device had 'shorted out' the other. The ill-fated bracelet had been subtly altered. What had been designed as a work-saving tool had become a terrorist's delight, melting microcircuitry whenever it was used.

"It was a foolish omission on my part, Captain," Spock apologized. "I regret that my... carelessness... was the cause of so much trouble."

"But you weren't careless, Spock," Kirk protested, shaking his head. "You didn't know about the theorem or what it would do when you built that bracelet. It wasn't your fault."

Spock looked away, distressed. "Perhaps not. But... I wanted so much for it to be..."

"Perfect?" Kirk asked gently. The Vulcan nodded silently, eyes still downcast. "Spock..." Kirk reached out and took his friend's warm hands in his own, squeezing gently, forcing Spock to meet his eyes. "There's something I think you should know about that bracelet, before you fix it."

A curious eyebrow rose.

"I'm *glad* it wasn't perfect," Kirk said, "and I'm not sure I want it to be perfect."

Spock stared at him, perplexed. "That is not logical, Jim."

Kirk smiled. "I know. But, Spock, if your gift had been everything you had intended it to be, I might have lost something very precious today. You told me once, long ago, that a Starship runs on loyalty... and that nothing could replace it or the man to whom it was given. Well, today's experiences taught me that the opposite is also true. I can't be a good commander without good, loyal, cooperative people behind me, Spock... people like you, on whom I can count to give me their best no matter what. Spock, as convenient as that com bracelet might be, it will never be as valuable to my command -- or to me personally -- as you are. You, or any of my people. Do you understand?"

Spock's warm brown gaze came to rest on their joined hands. "I... believe I do," he admitted haltingly. "When you were missing this afternoon, Jim, I was... we were... worried about you. There was no way of knowing whether you had been injured -- or worse -- until you were found. And then when the alien ship made contact... Kringle knew, somehow, about the theorem, *and* about how pleased I was with it. But even so, he asked me what I wanted for Christmas... as though he knew that your gift meant nothing to me... without you."

Kirk smiled again, tenderly, knowing how difficult such admissions were for Spock. "It would appear, my Vulcan friend, that you have learned a lot more about Christmas than Bones gives you credit for."

Kirk saw his smile reflected in his First Officer's eyes, and for a moment the two of them stepped into that other, shared universe that was uniquely theirs. The party swirled on around them, unnoticed. Then, lest the moment become entirely too maudlin, Kirk broke the mood with an impish grin.

"Now, tell me the truth, Spock," he demanded, "did you really think Kringle was Santa Claus?"

Spock shook his head, refusing to be baited. "I cannot answer that, Jim. He was a being of remarkable wisdom and insight, for all of his chicanery. But as to whether he was 'Santa Claus'..."

Kirk chuckled at the Vulcan's steadfast refusal to commit himself. "My dad used to tell me that the real Santa Claus was the embodiment of the true Spirit of Christmas," he reminisced. "He said that once you had encountered the genuine article -- as opposed to the department store variety -- your outlook on life would be forever changed."

Spock sat for a long moment, considering that. Finally he looked up, a tiny smile of his own playing around the corners of his mouth. "Then, if your father was to be believed," he said, "I have *indeed* met the 'real' Santa Claus." He looked around the room surreptitiously, making sure none of the frolicking crowd was close enough to hear him add, "If there *is* such a thing as magic, Jim, he *was*."

"Pssst! Spock!"

The Vulcan looked up from his harp as he heard McCoy softly, urgently calling his name. Beside him, Uhura also lifted her head and whispered, "Ohhhh...."

McCoy gestured with his free hand at the gold-shirted man leaning heavily against him. Kirk had fallen asleep, reight there under the tree, on McCoy's shoulder.

Spock turned to Uhura. "Was this the result of my playing or your singing, Lieutenant?" he deadpanned. She answered him definatively in the same manner.

"Neither, Mr. Spock. This was the result of too many sugarplums." She winked at McCoy.

Spock nodded, accepting her evaluation without question. He had no idea what a 'sugarplum' was, but who should know better than a mother? He set down his harp, rose, and crossed the small distance with noiseless steps. In another moment, Kirk's unmoving form rested securely in the Vulcan's strong arms.

"Thanks, Spock," McCoy breathed, relieved that he could stretch. "But if you don't mind my askin', what are you goin' to do with him *now*?"

Spock looked down into the face of the slumbering man nestled so trustingly against his chest. "I am going to take him home with me, Doctor," he replied softly, not caring for the moment how McCoy interpreted his words or his none-too-Vulcan tone. He paused to brush that persistant lock of hair out of his Captain's face, and then rose, snuggling his precious burden closer.

"He is, after all, precisely what I asked for," he defended in answer to the Doctor's startled look. "Goodnight, Doctor... Lieutenants... Merry Christmas to you all."

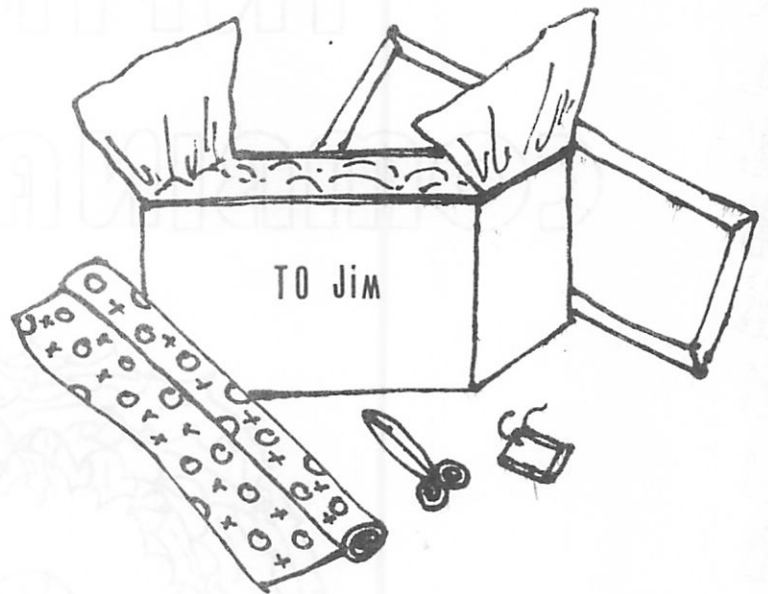
"And to all a good night," McCoy said to his retreating back.



Only the Humans

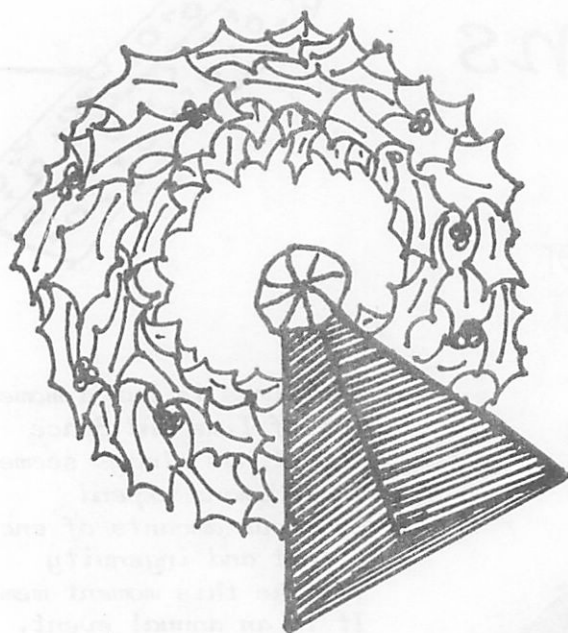
by

Beverly Volker



Christmas is but a moment
Out of Time and Space
And it has always seemed to me
That Humans expend
Enormous amounts of energy
Effort and ingenuity
To make this moment memorable.
It is an annual event.
Each must be just like all previous ones
Only better.
The same songs must be sung
The same food must be consumed
The same ornaments must be hung
On a tree better than last year's.
I must admit to a distinct
Confoundment
Of this uniquely Human attitude.
Vulcan discipline practices
No such enigmatic behavior.
Thus, as this holiday once more approaches,
I shall endeavor to observe my shipmates'
Traditionally erratic actions
In the quest for understanding
Some logical explanation for this phenomena.
Perhaps I will be able to extrapolate a clue
During my visit to ship's stores
Where I must purchase a large red bow
Specifically sized and designed to coordinate
With the decorated paper I have chosen
To wrap Jim's gift this year. . .

INFINITE COMBINATIONS



by Gina Godwin

art by Caryl Sibbett

Spock hesitated at the door to the Captain's cabin. He had stopped by because he had thought that Kirk might want to talk to someone. The captain had been uncharacteristically withdrawn recently. This was unusual in itself, but coupled with the fact that the Human holiday of Christmas was imminent, Kirk's present mood was causing his First Officer to be quite concerned.

As he stood there debating whether or not he should disturb the captain, Spock's sensitive ears detected the strains of music emanating from the cabin. Although the tune seemed familiar, at first he did not recognize it. Then he remembered where he had heard it before. It was one of the Christmas carols his mother used to play each year at this time. The tunes used to filter out from behind her study door, where they were picked up by her son's sensitive Vulcan ears. She only listened to them when she thought nobody else was around, and he speculated that this was because she felt that she would be acknowledging her homesickness if she played them around the rest of the family. Remembering this, he also recalled that she, too, had been quite uncommunicative during the Earth month of December. Spock wondered how a holiday which was supposed to be joyous could elicit so much melancholia in some Humans. He had read extensively about Human customs, and his literature had always indicated that Christmas was a time for "love and cheer and family."

Family. Amanda had a family, but not one that could appreciate the sentiments Humans felt at Christmas. In retrospect, and in light of his vast experience with Earthlings, he mused that perhaps he and his father had been as much a cause of her melancholia as a remedy for it.

Since his brother Sam had died earlier in the year, and his nephew Peter had gone back to Earth to live with Jim's mother, what remained of Kirk's family was literally scattered clear across the galaxy. Spock decided that perhaps the captain was feeling excluded and lonely.

Spock did not entirely comprehend the "meaning of Christmas", but as a Vulcan he understood very well the significance and importance of family. He reflected that perhaps there was something he could do to make the holiday season happier for the two people who mattered most to him. He turned and headed toward his cabin. In his mind, he formed the message he would send to Vulcan.



Several days later, Kirk, Spock and McCoy were having lunch in the galley. The air was charged with excitement as crew members all around them discussed their holiday plans. Since the Enterprise would be docked at Starbase 5 for the last two weeks in December, many crew members would be seeing their families. Some would be coming to visit. Those who had relatives within reasonable shuttle travel distance were being permitted to leave the base to spend the holidays with them. McCoy was among the latter group. He would be going to Deneb III to see his daughter, Joanna, whom he had not seen in several years. He was in a good mood and for a change was not using his spare time trying to think of ways to annoy Spock.

"Captain," said Spock, "would you be interested in a game of chess after the watch is over?"

"Hmnn? Oh, sure, Spock. I guess so." Kirk rose to leave. "I'd better get back to the bridge. Everyone around here seems to have only half a mind on their jobs. I think I need to keep a sharp eye on things. See you later."

McCoy, who had been talking to the head of the Christmas decorations committee at the next table, turned back and followed Kirk with a troubled gaze as he left the room. "I'm kind of worried about him, Spock. He never spent a lot of time with Sam, but family is family, and I think his brother's death is finally starting to hit him." McCoy looked down at his lunch and realized that he had lost his appetite. "I had thought of inviting him to come with me to see Joanna, but I'm afraid that as much as she likes Jim, she would resent someone else's presence. We both have a lot of lost time to make up for, and I expect we'll be spending most of it just talking, the two of us."

"Don't worry, Doctor. I think the captain's holiday will turn out just fine. And I trust that yours will be all you hope it will be. Now I, too, must return to work."

McCoy examined Spock's words for any trace of sarcasm, and found none. Intending to question him, McCoy found the Vulcan was already weaving his way through the crowd, and decided that he'd have to talk to him later. The doctor was too happy about his upcoming visit with Joanna to worry about anything for long. He resumed his conversation about the decorative uses for surgical instruments.



"Captain, your mind does not seem to be on the game tonight."

"Sorry, Spock. I guess I was thinking about other things. Maybe we should just postpone this till another day." Kirk rose and poured himself a drink. "Would you like something?"

"Yes, I believe I will have a brandy, thank you," replied Spock.

Kirk handed the glass to Spock with a teasing smile on his lips that did not quite reach his eyes. "All right, what's up, Spock?"

"Up, Captain?"

"Yes, 'up,' Spock. You may not notice your own patterns, but I do. You never agree to an alcoholic drink unless there is something you want to talk about. Then you accept a brandy, take one sip of it, and launch in. And besides, I know that you're leaving for Vulcan tomorrow."

"Captain," said Spock, in a mock-serious tone, "surely you are not accusing me of being predictable?"

Great, Kirk thought. Now he had offended Spock and he would clam up on him. Kirk was too morose himself to detect the facetiousness in Spock's reply.

Before Kirk could make a denial, Spock took a sip of his brandy, smiled ever so slightly, and sat it down on the table. He leaned forward and clasped his hands in front of him. "Actually, I have a favor to ask of you."

"Name it, Spock."

Spock looked down at his hands. He was not adept at deceiving Kirk even slightly, no matter how good the reason for it. In addition, he had just been reminded of how well Kirk knew him. "Christmas is coming, Captain. This has always been a difficult season for my mother to be away from Earth. This year my father will be gone on a diplomatic mission, and she has asked me to spend the holiday with her. Of course I would like to go, for her sake, but I'm afraid that I am not very good at getting 'in the Christmas spirit.'" He rose and walked to the desk. Picking up a paperweight, he shifted it from hand to hand, concentrating intently on the movement. "I thought, perhaps, since you are too far from Earth to spend the next week with your own family, you might consent to accompany me to Vulcan and keep my mother company." At last he dared to glance up at Kirk.

The captain looked curiously at his First Officer. He knew Spock so well, he could easily read his moods, and the same could be said of Spock's sensitivity to his captain's feelings. He realized that Spock had picked up on his sadness, and that this was the Vulcan's way of helping him without making him feel like he was being pitied. "I'd like that, Spock," he said quietly. "I think it would be fun."

"Thank you, Captain. I have already arranged to leave on a shuttle to Vulcan early tomorrow morning. I'll go finish packing and, with your permission, arrange for another seat." Deliberately, looking Kirk straight in the eye and ever so slightly turning up one corner of his mouth, he took another sip of brandy. Placing it back on the table, he said, "Good night, Jim. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Spock. Oh - and thank your mother for the invitation."

Spock turned at the slight note of teasing in Kirk's voice, and was pleased to see that this time the smile had finally reached his sparkling hazel eyes.



Spock glanced anxiously at his wrist chronometer, even though he knew exactly how much time had elapsed since the last time he had looked. Kirk should have arrived ten minutes ago, and it was not like him to be late. Spock was sure he had not changed his mind.

Just then Kirk stepped into the shuttle, carrying a large bundle. "Sorry I'm late, Spock. This thing is heavy." He settled into his seat and unfastened the seat belt.

"A tree, Jim? That is a tree, isn't it?" He glanced distastefully at the clump of dirt that had fallen on his shoe.

Kirk followed his First Officer's gaze and smiled up at him. "Sorry, Spock. But Christmas isn't Christmas without a tree."

"I have never understood why Humans find it necessary to kill a tree in order to celebrate this holiday of yours."

"Oh, Spock, I'm not going to kill it. I checked with the botany department this morning. This particular evergreen hybrid is well suited to the atmosphere on Vulcan. When Sam and I were little, our parents started a family tradition that, as far as I know, my mother is still continuing. Each day, the day after the New Year, we plant our Christmas tree to commemorate something. There is one for each of our births, one for my acceptance into Starfleet, one for Sam's marriage and Peter's birth, one in memory of my father. With your mother's permission, I'm going to plant this one someplace on Vulcan in memory of Sam." He picked up the clump of dirt and packed it back around the roots of the tree. "Do you think she'll mind?"

"No, Jim," he replied softly. "I think she would be honored." They were each lost in their own thoughts, Kirk remembering his family life on Earth, and Spock worrying about Kirk. Sometimes Spock almost wished he could be more Human. A Human would have reached out physically to his friend, but Spock still found that difficult. Still, he knew that Kirk understood him as he was. He felt truly fortunate to have such a friend. *Perhaps, he thought, I am getting into the 'Christmas Spirit' after all.*

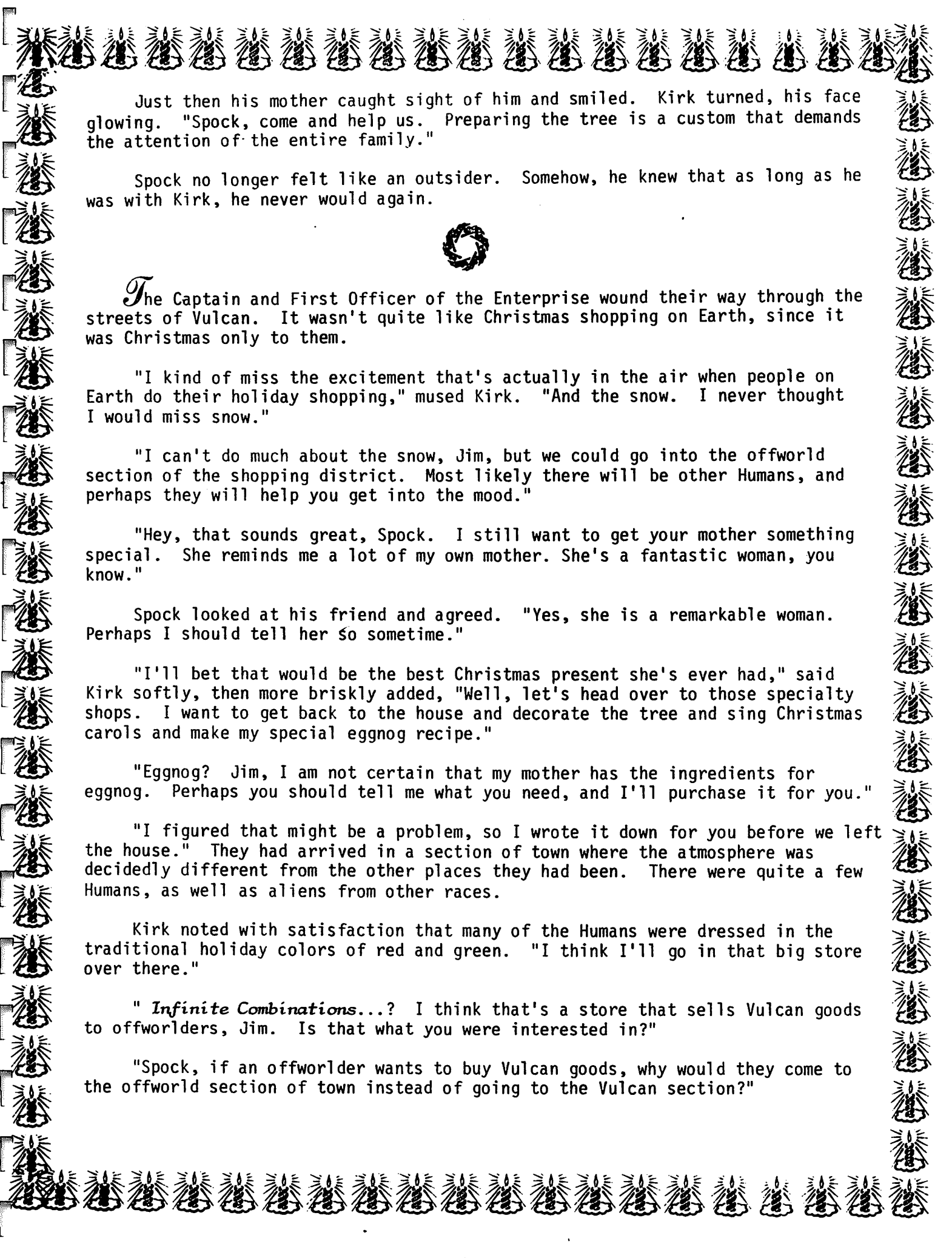


"Spock, I'm so glad you both could come. Jim, it's good to see you again. Is that a tree you're carrying?" Amanda, for someone who was usually so sedate, was gushing with enthusiasm. She walked over to the tree and exclaimed, "An evergreen! Oh, how I have missed evergreens! It is such a shame that they won't survive on Vulcan."

"Well, this one will, and I intend to plant it before I leave, if you'll allow me. According to the experts, it should not only survive but actually thrive here. But in the meantime, I think we should set it up and get it decorated. Do you have any ornaments?"

"I certainly do," Amanda replied excitedly. "I haven't taken them out in years, but I brought them with me from Earth. Lights, too. Spock mentioned that you two wanted to do some shopping, so I'll dig through the storage area while you're gone."

Kirk and Amanda began untying the string around the tree while Spock carried their luggage up to their room. When he returned, they were still busy arranging the branches and exchanging stories of Christmases gone by. He stood watching his mother and his friend and felt extraneous. Never had he seen his mother so happy. When she married Sarek of Vulcan she had adopted, to the best of her ability, his lifestyle. Spock had not seen the Human Amanda since his childhood, and even then she had never been quite like she was now. It seemed his plan was working.



Just then his mother caught sight of him and smiled. Kirk turned, his face glowing. "Spock, come and help us. Preparing the tree is a custom that demands the attention of the entire family."

Spock no longer felt like an outsider. Somehow, he knew that as long as he was with Kirk, he never would again.



The Captain and First Officer of the Enterprise wound their way through the streets of Vulcan. It wasn't quite like Christmas shopping on Earth, since it was Christmas only to them.

"I kind of miss the excitement that's actually in the air when people on Earth do their holiday shopping," mused Kirk. "And the snow. I never thought I would miss snow."

"I can't do much about the snow, Jim, but we could go into the offworld section of the shopping district. Most likely there will be other Humans, and perhaps they will help you get into the mood."

"Hey, that sounds great, Spock. I still want to get your mother something special. She reminds me a lot of my own mother. She's a fantastic woman, you know."

Spock looked at his friend and agreed. "Yes, she is a remarkable woman. Perhaps I should tell her so sometime."

"I'll bet that would be the best Christmas present she's ever had," said Kirk softly, then more briskly added, "Well, let's head over to those specialty shops. I want to get back to the house and decorate the tree and sing Christmas carols and make my special eggnog recipe."

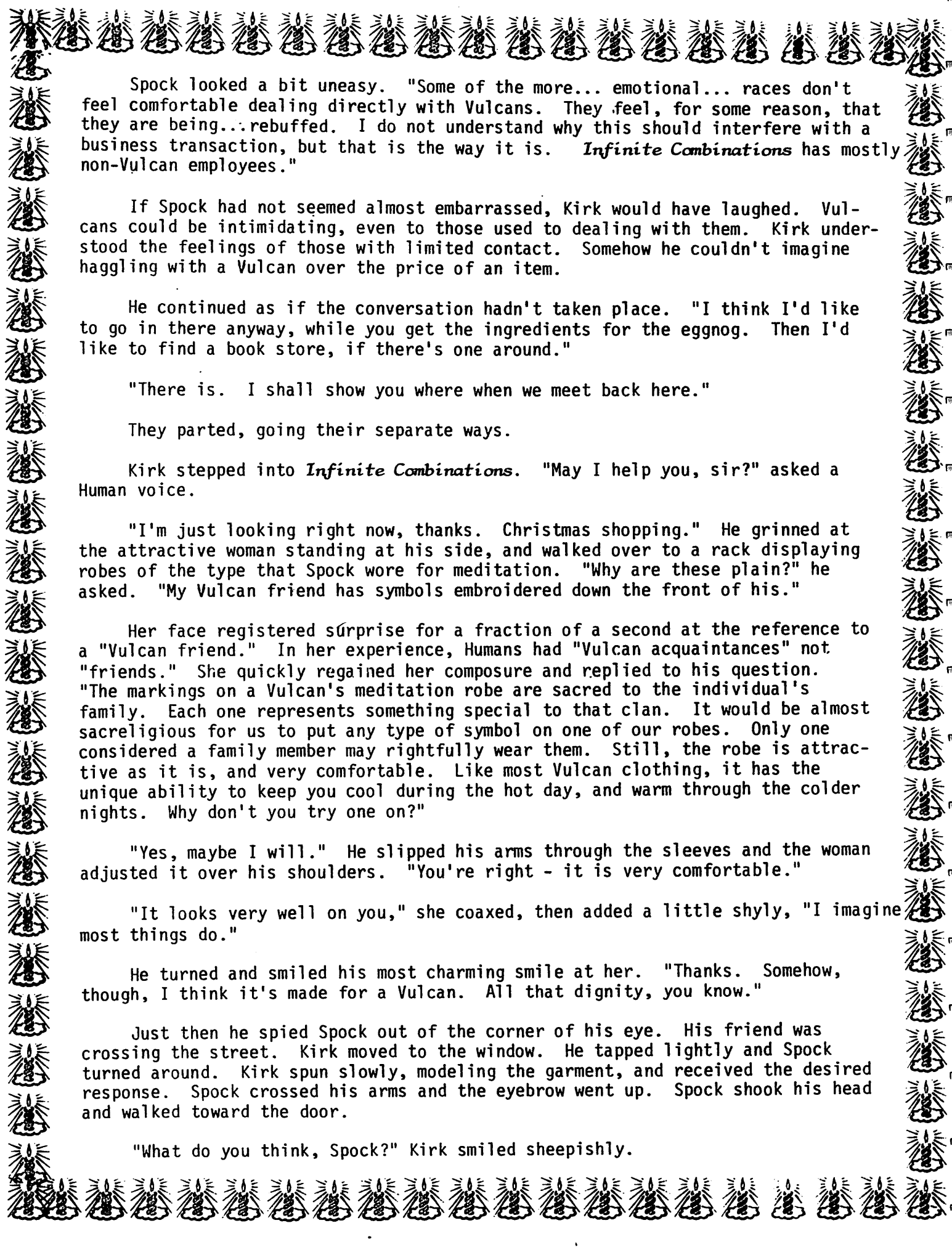
"Eggnog? Jim, I am not certain that my mother has the ingredients for eggnog. Perhaps you should tell me what you need, and I'll purchase it for you."

"I figured that might be a problem, so I wrote it down for you before we left the house." They had arrived in a section of town where the atmosphere was decidedly different from the other places they had been. There were quite a few Humans, as well as aliens from other races.

Kirk noted with satisfaction that many of the Humans were dressed in the traditional holiday colors of red and green. "I think I'll go in that big store over there."

"*Infinite Combinations*...? I think that's a store that sells Vulcan goods to offworlders, Jim. Is that what you were interested in?"

"Spock, if an offworlder wants to buy Vulcan goods, why would they come to the offworld section of town instead of going to the Vulcan section?"



Spock looked a bit uneasy. "Some of the more... emotional... races don't feel comfortable dealing directly with Vulcans. They feel, for some reason, that they are being... rebuffed. I do not understand why this should interfere with a business transaction, but that is the way it is. *Infinite Combinations* has mostly non-Vulcan employees."

If Spock had not seemed almost embarrassed, Kirk would have laughed. Vulcans could be intimidating, even to those used to dealing with them. Kirk understood the feelings of those with limited contact. Somehow he couldn't imagine haggling with a Vulcan over the price of an item.

He continued as if the conversation hadn't taken place. "I think I'd like to go in there anyway, while you get the ingredients for the eggnog. Then I'd like to find a book store, if there's one around."

"There is. I shall show you where when we meet back here."

They parted, going their separate ways.

Kirk stepped into *Infinite Combinations*. "May I help you, sir?" asked a Human voice.

"I'm just looking right now, thanks. Christmas shopping." He grinned at the attractive woman standing at his side, and walked over to a rack displaying robes of the type that Spock wore for meditation. "Why are these plain?" he asked. "My Vulcan friend has symbols embroidered down the front of his."

Her face registered surprise for a fraction of a second at the reference to a "Vulcan friend." In her experience, Humans had "Vulcan acquaintances" not "friends." She quickly regained her composure and replied to his question. "The markings on a Vulcan's meditation robe are sacred to the individual's family. Each one represents something special to that clan. It would be almost sacreligious for us to put any type of symbol on one of our robes. Only one considered a family member may rightfully wear them. Still, the robe is attractive as it is, and very comfortable. Like most Vulcan clothing, it has the unique ability to keep you cool during the hot day, and warm through the colder nights. Why don't you try one on?"

"Yes, maybe I will." He slipped his arms through the sleeves and the woman adjusted it over his shoulders. "You're right - it is very comfortable."

"It looks very well on you," she coaxed, then added a little shyly, "I imagine most things do."

He turned and smiled his most charming smile at her. "Thanks. Somehow, though, I think it's made for a Vulcan. All that dignity, you know."

Just then he spied Spock out of the corner of his eye. His friend was crossing the street. Kirk moved to the window. He tapped lightly and Spock turned around. Kirk spun slowly, modeling the garment, and received the desired response. Spock crossed his arms and the eyebrow went up. Spock shook his head and walked toward the door.

"What do you think, Spock?" Kirk smiled sheepishly.

"You need not feel presumptuous, Captain," said Spock, noting the look on Kirk's face. "The robe by itself has no special meaning, and you would probably find it quite comfortable and useful a garment, especially during your stay on Vulcan."

Spock glanced at the saleslady, who had shown renewed interest when she heard him address Kirk as "Captain." As a matter of fact, she seemed to find the Vulcan quite interesting as well. "Wrap it up for me please, miss."

Spock noticed that her eyes widened slightly at the "please." She apparently regarded his behavior as atypical. She would never know how long it had taken him to realize just how important these social conventions were to Humans.

Kirk started to protest, and Spock turned his attention back to his friend. "My Christmas gift to you, Captain. Now, while I'm waiting for this, there is a bookstore down the street, on your left. If you want to go ahead and start browsing around, I'll meet you there in a few minutes."

Kirk was removing the robe. "Okay, Spock. Any special type of book that your mother likes?"

"She has very eclectic taste in reading material. I'm sure that you would be better able to pick something out for a Human woman than I would."

After the door had closed behind Kirk, Spock turned to the by now thoroughly bewildered saleswoman. He took a card and began to write on the back of it. "I will pick this up tomorrow. Please have it ready, and wrapped in Christmas paper."

She glanced at the card, and then at the departing Vulcan. "But, sir..." He was gone. She shook her head in amazement and went to tell the other girls about her interesting customers and their surprising purchase.



Entering the front door of Amanda's home, they were greeted by the scent of cooking, evergreens, and potpourri -- the smells of Christmas. Amanda was humming carols as she emerged from the kitchen. "Oh, it's so nice to see you two home so early." Kirk and Spock exchanged amused glances at her enthusiasm. "I've put the lights on the tree already, but I waited for you to get back to help decorate it."

Kirk grinned. "Spock, help your mother get the stuff organized while I whip up some eggnog. I'll be right back." He disappeared into the kitchen with his bag of ingredients.

"Tell me, Mother, what do we do with all of this? I'm afraid that I am a bit out of my element here." He joined Amanda on the floor and began sorting through the collection of ornaments.

Kirk came into the family room to find his hostess and his friend bent over dozens of ornaments of all sizes and shapes. Spock really seemed to be enjoying himself. Of course, one would have to know Spock to know that, but then, he *did* know Spock. He handed each of them a drink, picked up an ornament, and began

the traditional Earth ceremony by placing it on the tree. Then he reached into his pocket and hung another gleaming object next to the first.

"What is that, Jim?" asked Spock.

Kirk stepped aside. "It's something I picked up in *Infinite Combinations*. An IDIC. I don't think it was originally intended as an ornament for a Christmas tree, but I think it's appropriate, don't you?"

"Yes, very appropriate, " Spock agreed softly.

Amanda saw the loving glance that passed between her son and his friend and she was filled with warmth. She had always prayed that Spock would find someone who could appreciate him and all that he was and could be, and she saw that now he finally had. She smiled contentedly. "Well, now, if we're getting out the special ornaments, I guess I should put this on." She placed a perfect miniature solid silver replica of the Enterprise next to the IDIC. "I had this made as a Christmas present for you, Spock. It will eventually fly in a crystal dome with a holographic 'galaxy' inside. I was going to send it to you, but then you and Jim showed up on my doorstep. How fortuitous."

Spock gazed at the gleaming starship, then at Amanda. His usually inexpressive countenance softened slightly. He thought of the conversation he had with Kirk earlier that afternoon. He remembered that time, not so long ago, when he had wept over the fact that he had never told his mother that he loved her. It occurred to him that, given the dangers inherent in his career and the fact that he rarely made it home, he may not have the chance again. "It is beautiful, Mother. As always, you have chosen something that has a special meaning to me. Thank you."

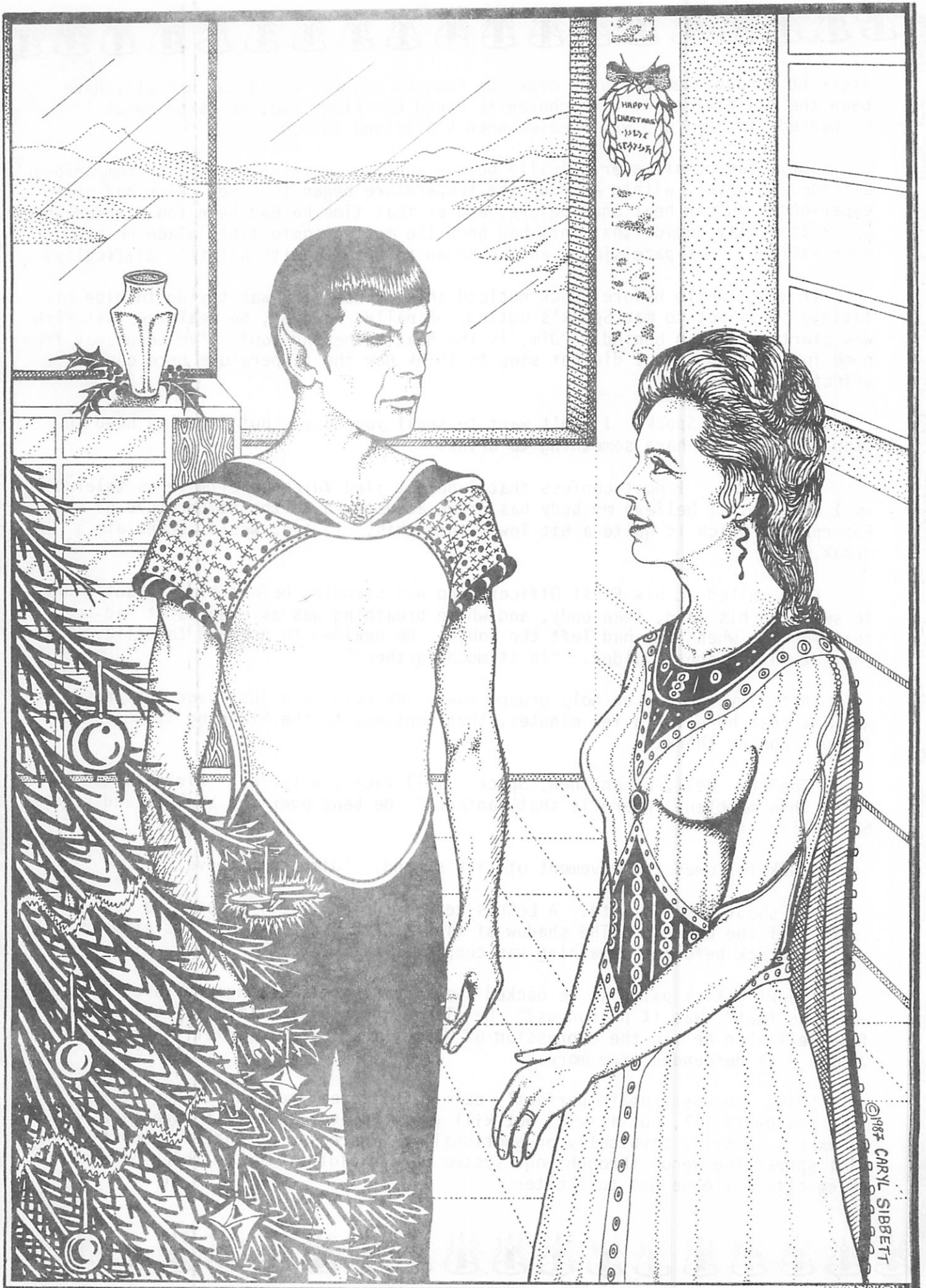
Knowing Spock as he did, Kirk realized that these simple words, words uttered routinely by a Human, contained more emotion than his Vulcan friend was generally prone to express. He busied himself on the opposite side of the tree. Although he was studiously avoiding eavesdropping, he was gratified when he heard Spock whisper, "Mother, I have never said this before, and I may never be able to say it again, but I... I love you, Mother."

"Oh, Spock..." Her eyes filled with tears. She touched the side of his face lightly, then picked up an ornament and resumed decorating the tree. She knew how much that declaration had cost him and she had no desire to cause her son embarrassment. As far as she was concerned, she had had her Christmas. Spock handed her another crystal globe, and she smiled at him as the two of them worked side by side.

Finally, the trimming was complete and they all stood back and admired their handiwork. The tree was indeed lovely, even Spock had to admit. Maybe there was something to this Christmas celebration after all.



The next morning, they rose early. Spock had expressed a desire to hike through the desert to spend the day at the family ceremonial grounds. Although



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trekking through temperatures over one hundred degrees would not normally have been the way Kirk might have chosen to spend Christmas Eve, he asked Spock if he wanted company, and was pleased when his friend agreed.

They started off energetically before sunrise, walking briskly in companionable silence. However, within an hour the temperature began to rise. Kirk had only experienced Vulcan heat once before, and at that time he had been too worried about Spock to really notice that this had been the most uncomfortable place he had ever visited. His pace slowed and he began to breathe with a little difficulty.

It was a while before Spock noticed this, since Kirk was trying to hide his fatigue so as not to mar Spock's outing. Finally, however, he realized that Kirk was starting to lag behind. "Jim, is the heat bothering you? I've been away from home for so long that I did not stop to think how the temperature here could affect an offworlder."

"I'm sorry, Spock. I don't want to spoil your day. But I really need to stop and rest and have something to drink."

"Of course. I must confess that I do not find Vulcan's climate as tolerable as I used to. I believe my body has grown accustomed to the temperature of the Enterprise, which is quite a bit lower than this. I, too, would appreciate a break."

Kirk smiled at his First Officer, who was standing before him without a drop of sweat on his long, lean body, and whose breathing was as even as it had been that morning when they had left the house. He decided to pretend to believe Spock and sat on a nearby boulder. "Is it much further?"

"Actually, we are on holy ground now. The ruins are just over that rise. We will rest here for a few minutes, then continue to the Standing Stones. It is much cooler there."

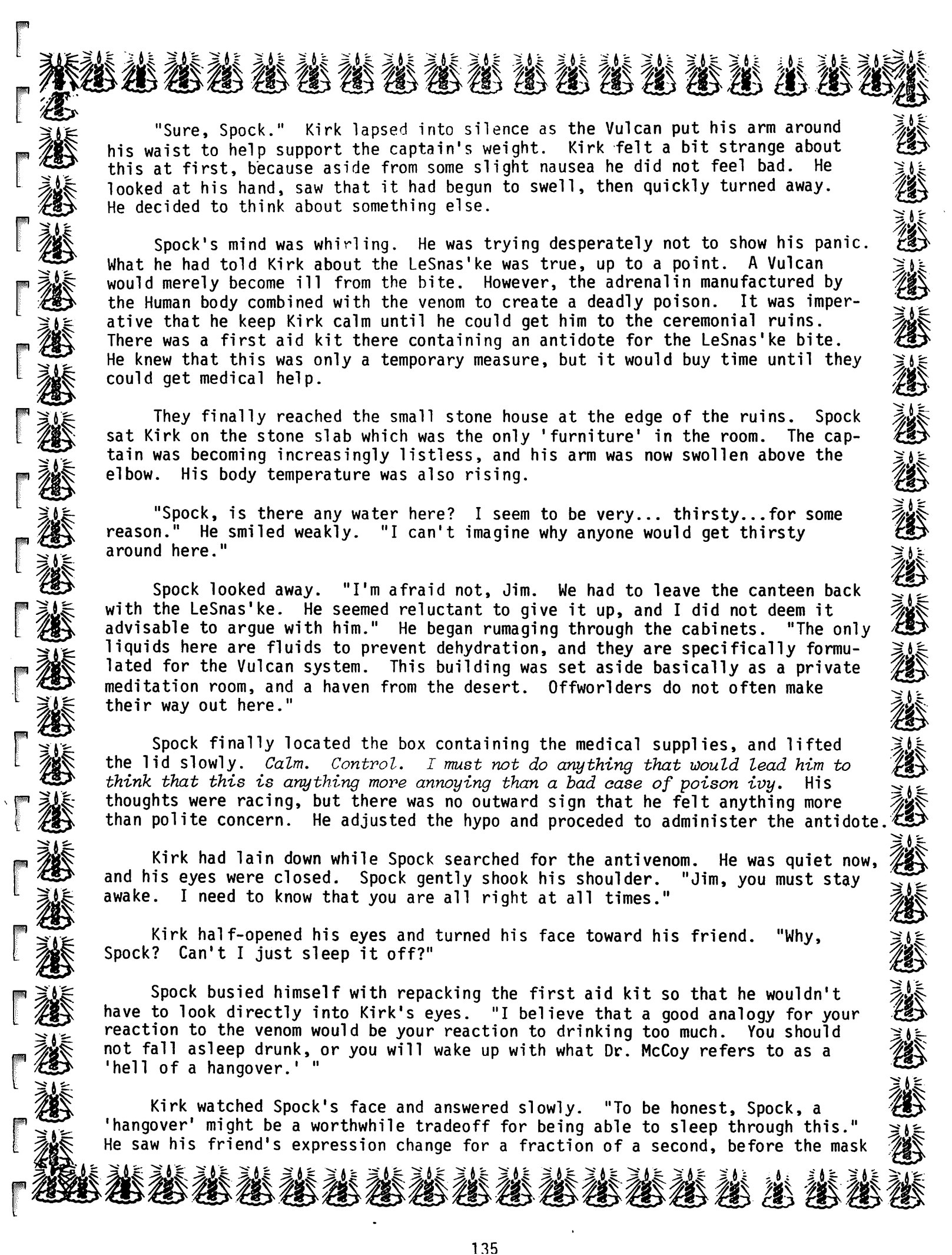
"Cooler? Well, c'mon then, Spock. I'll race you there." Kirk started to rise, then mumbled, "Where is that canteen?" He bent over the boulder and reached behind it.

Spock followed the movement of Kirk's hand. "Jim, don't move!"

The shout was too late. A LeSnas'ke had curled itself around the cool surface of the canteen. The shadow of Kirk's hand had disturbed its slumber, and it struck before the warning was complete.

"Yeow!" Kirk paled as he backed away from the slithering creature. "Spock, what was that? Was it poisonous?" He glanced hopefully at the Vulcan, but his face fell when he saw the expression of dismay that flashed briefly before the Vulcan mask descended once more.

"Jim, you must remain perfectly calm. The venom from the LeSnas'ke will make you quite ill, but it will not kill you. However, you must take care not to exert yourself, physically or emotionally. Increased adrenalin production will spread the venom through your system more rapidly. Try to think of something else while we get to shelter."



"Sure, Spock." Kirk lapsed into silence as the Vulcan put his arm around his waist to help support the captain's weight. Kirk felt a bit strange about this at first, because aside from some slight nausea he did not feel bad. He looked at his hand, saw that it had begun to swell, then quickly turned away. He decided to think about something else.

Spock's mind was whirling. He was trying desperately not to show his panic. What he had told Kirk about the LeSnas'ke was true, up to a point. A Vulcan would merely become ill from the bite. However, the adrenalin manufactured by the Human body combined with the venom to create a deadly poison. It was imperative that he keep Kirk calm until he could get him to the ceremonial ruins. There was a first aid kit there containing an antidote for the LeSnas'ke bite. He knew that this was only a temporary measure, but it would buy time until they could get medical help.

They finally reached the small stone house at the edge of the ruins. Spock sat Kirk on the stone slab which was the only 'furniture' in the room. The captain was becoming increasingly listless, and his arm was now swollen above the elbow. His body temperature was also rising.

"Spock, is there any water here? I seem to be very... thirsty... for some reason." He smiled weakly. "I can't imagine why anyone would get thirsty around here."

Spock looked away. "I'm afraid not, Jim. We had to leave the canteen back with the LeSnas'ke. He seemed reluctant to give it up, and I did not deem it advisable to argue with him." He began rumaging through the cabinets. "The only liquids here are fluids to prevent dehydration, and they are specifically formulated for the Vulcan system. This building was set aside basically as a private meditation room, and a haven from the desert. Offworlders do not often make their way out here."

Spock finally located the box containing the medical supplies, and lifted the lid slowly. *Calm. Control. I must not do anything that would lead him to think that this is anything more annoying than a bad case of poison ivy.* His thoughts were racing, but there was no outward sign that he felt anything more than polite concern. He adjusted the hypo and proceeded to administer the antidote.

Kirk had lain down while Spock searched for the antivenom. He was quiet now, and his eyes were closed. Spock gently shook his shoulder. "Jim, you must stay awake. I need to know that you are all right at all times."

Kirk half-opened his eyes and turned his face toward his friend. "Why, Spock? Can't I just sleep it off?"

Spock busied himself with repacking the first aid kit so that he wouldn't have to look directly into Kirk's eyes. "I believe that a good analogy for your reaction to the venom would be your reaction to drinking too much. You should not fall asleep drunk, or you will wake up with what Dr. McCoy refers to as a 'hell of a hangover.'"

Kirk watched Spock's face and answered slowly. "To be honest, Spock, a 'hangover' might be a worthwhile tradeoff for being able to sleep through this." He saw his friend's expression change for a fraction of a second, before the mask

of tranquility descended again. Kirk felt a moment of panic, then decided that even if Spock was not telling him everything, he was better off staying calm and trusting the Vulcan. "Still, I guess you know more about this than I do. It's your home field. So, tell me, what's the game plan?"

"The antidote I just administered will help alleviate some of the symptoms until we can get professional medical help. I can give you only a minimal dose because the serum is formulated for Vulcan physiology, and I am uncertain about the proper administration for a Human. "

"And you don't think we should just head back now?"

"Even the Vulcan Masters do not travel the desert at mid-day, and their bodies are more attuned to the extremes of this planet's climate than even the hardest of town-dwelling Vulcans. The temperature rises above 115 degrees before it starts to cool at sundown, which is not for 5.23 hours."

"So, we're sitting the bench, huh? Okay, Spock. I'm in your hands."

"Since there is no water, you must conserve as much energy as possible. Even talking is not advisable."

"If I can't talk and I can't sleep, then I'm just going to lay here and daydream. Let me know when it's time to go." Kirk shifted uncomfortably and closed his eyes again.

Spock rose and walked to the small window which opened to a view of gleaming sand. The Vulcan sun was shining mercilessly down upon the desert, and would continue to do so for quite some time. Time that he hoped Kirk had.



Spock stepped back inside the room and crossed to his Captain. The temperature was finally beginning to lower. They would have to move now. He estimated that it would take him approximately 2.35 hours to get home, if he carried Kirk the whole way. He had waited until the time of day when it was cool enough for him to tolerate the trip across the desert, but was still early enough that the dangerous animals would not be roaming. The desert was never safe, but this was as close as it would come for two unarmed men with no water. He swallowed the liquid in the vial from the medical kit -- at least he would not have to worry about dehydration, and would therefore be better able to help his friend.

"Jim... Jim, we must go now." He shook the captain gently. Kirk had drifted into a trancelike state. His eyes were closed, but he was still lucid.

"Spock, I don't think I can walk. I feel really weak, like my arms and legs aren't there." He licked his parched lips. "Maybe you should consider going without me and bringing back help."

"No, I cannot do that." Spock took a deep breath and turned Kirk's face toward him as he held onto his hand. "Jim, I am certain that you have already

discerned that this bite is more serious than I indicated to you before. I did not wish to deceive you, but I did not believe that worry would be beneficial to you. The fact is, I do not know how serious this is. If a Vulcan had been bitten, it would have been just as I described to you. Human bodies produce chemicals which interact with the venom and create a far more dangerous toxin. We must get you back now. The last time you lapsed into unconsciousness, I had a hard time waking you up. I cannot leave you alone."

Spock reached his hand to touch Kirk's forehead. His temperature was above normal, but not yet in the range that was likely to cause brain damage. The antivenom was probably the only thing that had kept his captain alive this long, but he knew that Kirk needed medical attention soon. He checked the injured arm, and found that the tourniquet he had placed there earlier had done its job. The swelling had not spread much further. Spock knew that whatever happened to Kirk, today or years from now, he would always be at his side. "We will travel together."

" 'At my side, as if you'd always been there, and always would be.' That's what Edith said. Before she even knew us, she knew how it was between us." With great effort, he reached up his good arm and gripped the Vulcan's shoulder. "Let's go, my friend. My life, as always, is in your hands."

Spock bent over and lifted his captain in his arms. Kirk was exhausted by his conversation. Still, there was a smile of contentment on his pale, dry lips, and Spock knew that being open with him, not only about his condition but about his feelings, had probably increased Kirk's chance for survival.

The two men started out across the desert. It was much cooler now, but the light was fading fast. Spock kept up a steady patter of conversation, constantly asking questions that required an answer. Kirk forced himself to keep up his end of the dialogue, remembering Spock's admonition that he remain awake and coherent.

"Am I too heavy for you, Spock?"

"Captain, I am a Vulcan. I could carry twice your weight, and still it would not feel that much of a burden."

Kirk made a weak sound that passed for a chuckle. A Human making the statement would have been bragging, but from a Vulcan, it was merely a statement of fact. "He ain't heavy, he's my brother."

"What was that, Captain?"

"A line from an old song, Spock. A young boy in a war-torn country carried his brother for many miles for medical attention. When they asked him how he had managed, he smiled and said, 'He ain't heavy,' " Kirk opened his eyes and gazed into the tender, gentle eyes of his friend, " 'he's my brother.' "

"I believe I said something to that effect, Captain."

"Hmmm. Yes, I heard you." Kirk shifted his weight in Spock's arms and buried his head against his shoulder. He slipped again into a semiconscious state, acknowledging Spock's conversation in drowsy monosyllables.

Full night had fallen, and Spock turned his attention to listening for LeMatya. He heard them howling, but the sound was far in the distance. He was almost home now, and the beasts seldom ventured so close to town. Not for the first time in his life, he was grateful for the rigorous training he had undergone as a child. To an offworlder, it might seem almost cruel to put one so young through so much, but they could never appreciate how essential this training was to a native of this harsh planet.

At last, Spock could see his house. As he drew closer, he whispered to Kirk, "Look, Jim, you can see the Christmas tree shining in the window. It certainly is a welcome sight."

Kirk opened his eyes and gazed at the twinkling lights. "Merry Christmas, Spock."

"Merry Christmas, Jim."



Kirk awakened in the middle of Christmas day. Spock and another Vulcan, whom he assumed was a healer, were conversing across the room from his bed. Kirk raised himself up, drawing their attention, and they moved to his side.

"Captain Kirk, I am Stenn." The Vulcan laid his hand on Kirk's forehead. "The fever has broken and the swelling in your arm is diminishing. It has been my experience with LeSnas'ke bite that once the fever is gone, recovery is rapid. Still, I would recommend that you do not exert yourself for the next several days. I will examine you again before you depart for your ship." He left the room, not even waiting for a thank-you.

"He could give Bones a few lessons in bedside manner." Kirk turned to Spock. "I guess this hasn't been your mother's idea of a great Christmas."

"Nonsense!" Amanda swept into the room with a tray. "I'm terribly sorry about what happened to you, but I wouldn't have missed having you here for the world. Or," she whispered conspiratorily in Kirk's ear, "missed the look on Stenn's face when he saw our tree. He's been our family healer for years, and in all that time, I've seen only one expression on his face. Today, I saw another for the first time."

Kirk grinned. "I guess this has been a productive visit, then. What's for breakfast... ah, lunch?"

"Egg-drop soup. I figured you wouldn't be needing the eggs for eggnog any time soon, and you need the fluid and the protein." Amanda busied herself setting the tray in front of Kirk as he and Spock exchanged amused glances at her mothering. "Stenn said that you could go downstairs later to open gifts. I explained that this was an important Human ceremony and that we wouldn't allow you to tire too much." She hovered over Kirk as he dipped the spoon into the bowl and took a sip.

"Delicious! I'll be back on my feet in no time if you take this good care of me, Amanda."

"I intend to do just that. Now, we're going to go out and let you get some rest. Come on, dear."

"Yes, Mother." Spock smiled his little un-smile at Kirk and followed Amanda out of the room.



Kirk was settled comfortably on the couch when Amanda entered with a tray of steaming cups. "Hot chocolate, anyone?" She handed one to each of the men and took one herself. "Time to open presents!"

"You first, Amanda." Kirk handed her a package wrapped in red and green paper.

She opened it slowly, savoring the act. "A book! And a first edition! Oh, Jim, how wonderful. You know, I appreciate the variety offered by a computer, but there is nothing like curling up with a good, old-fashioned book." She looked at the title. "*The Mists of Avalon*. Have you read this?"

"No, but I've always been fascinated by the Arthurian legend. This is that tale told from the point of view of the women involved. I thought you would enjoy it."

"I'm sure I will. Such a magnificent yet tragic tale. Truly great people, trapped by their own humanity. Our weaknesses have brought about the downfall of so many civilizations. Sometimes I think the Vulcans have found the right way of dealing with emotions." She was silent for a moment, then roused herself out of her sober mood. "Then again, for all the grief emotion and its aftermath can bring, it certainly brings a great deal of pleasure just as often."

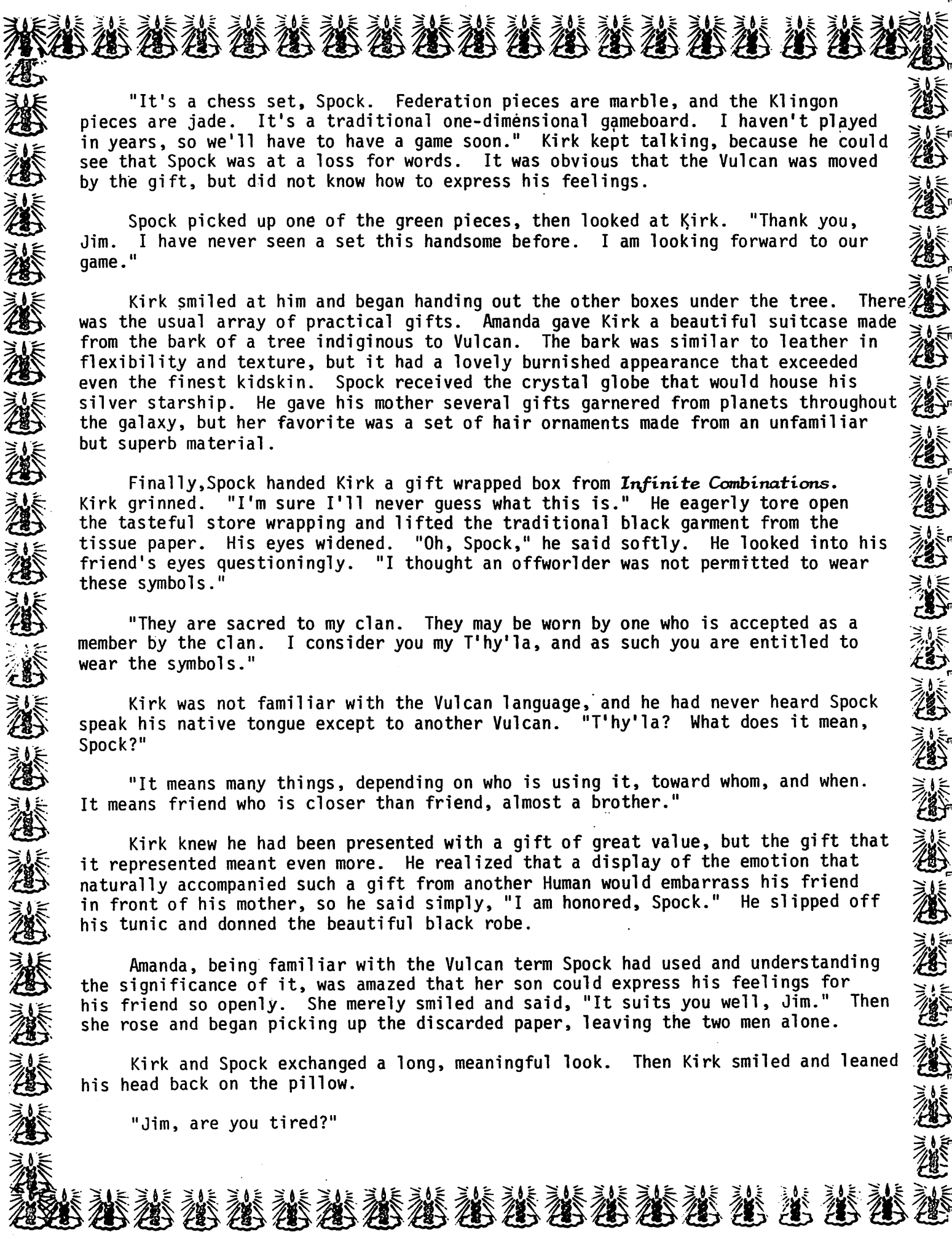
"It sounds to me as if you're fascinated with Camelot and its inhabitants, too."

"Yes, I always have been. I especially empathize with Arthur, torn between love for his wife and love for his friend. Sometimes I wish that someone had written down exactly what happened, as it occurred, so that we could all know for sure just how it was. Other times, I'm glad it was never recorded, for that legend has inspired such a wealth of imaginative tales. I will savor every word in this book. Thank you so much, Jim."

Kirk turned to Spock and handed him a large box. Spock accepted it awkwardly. There were no Vulcan ceremonies during which wrapped gifts were exchanged, and although he had watched Amanda open her present, he seemed uncertain where to begin.

"Come on, Spock. Just rip it open -- that's the best way."

Spock raised his eyebrow at Kirk, then tore away the paper in a single motion. He opened the lid and lifted out an exquisite, hand carved starship.



"It's a chess set, Spock. Federation pieces are marble, and the Klingon pieces are jade. It's a traditional one-dimensional gameboard. I haven't played in years, so we'll have to have a game soon." Kirk kept talking, because he could see that Spock was at a loss for words. It was obvious that the Vulcan was moved by the gift, but did not know how to express his feelings.

Spock picked up one of the green pieces, then looked at Kirk. "Thank you, Jim. I have never seen a set this handsome before. I am looking forward to our game."

Kirk smiled at him and began handing out the other boxes under the tree. There was the usual array of practical gifts. Amanda gave Kirk a beautiful suitcase made from the bark of a tree indigenous to Vulcan. The bark was similar to leather in flexibility and texture, but it had a lovely burnished appearance that exceeded even the finest kidskin. Spock received the crystal globe that would house his silver starship. He gave his mother several gifts garnered from planets throughout the galaxy, but her favorite was a set of hair ornaments made from an unfamiliar but superb material.

Finally, Spock handed Kirk a gift wrapped box from *Infinite Combinations*. Kirk grinned. "I'm sure I'll never guess what this is." He eagerly tore open the tasteful store wrapping and lifted the traditional black garment from the tissue paper. His eyes widened. "Oh, Spock," he said softly. He looked into his friend's eyes questioningly. "I thought an offworlder was not permitted to wear these symbols."

"They are sacred to my clan. They may be worn by one who is accepted as a member by the clan. I consider you my T'hy'la, and as such you are entitled to wear the symbols."

Kirk was not familiar with the Vulcan language, and he had never heard Spock speak his native tongue except to another Vulcan. "T'hy'la? What does it mean, Spock?"

"It means many things, depending on who is using it, toward whom, and when. It means friend who is closer than friend, almost a brother."

Kirk knew he had been presented with a gift of great value, but the gift that it represented meant even more. He realized that a display of the emotion that naturally accompanied such a gift from another Human would embarrass his friend in front of his mother, so he said simply, "I am honored, Spock." He slipped off his tunic and donned the beautiful black robe.

Amanda, being familiar with the Vulcan term Spock had used and understanding the significance of it, was amazed that her son could express his feelings for his friend so openly. She merely smiled and said, "It suits you well, Jim." Then she rose and began picking up the discarded paper, leaving the two men alone.

Kirk and Spock exchanged a long, meaningful look. Then Kirk smiled and leaned his head back on the pillow.

"Jim, are you tired?"

"Yes, Spock, I am, a little. It's been great, though. I'm glad we made it back here in time today. Actually, I'm glad we made it back period. I think maybe I'd better go up and get some sleep."

There was no protest this time when Spock bent to help him to his room. "Good night, Amanda. Merry Christmas."

"Sleep well, Jim."



Spock watched Kirk from his bedroom window. It had been a quiet week. They had played chess a lot, with the loser in the previous winner always having to be the commander of the Klingon fleet. They had spent a lot of time talking about past adventures and future plans. McCoy had even stopped by for dinner on his way back to the Enterprise. Kirk had recovered, although he was still weak.

Now, Kirk was in the back yard, planting the Christmas tree. Spock had dug the hole for him, but had understood that Kirk wanted to do the rest himself. As the last shovelful of dirt was tapped down on top of the roots, Spock started down the stairs to join his friend.

When he walked out the door, he saw Kirk leaning on the shovel, staring at the sturdy little evergreen. His shoulders were hunched over and he appeared lost in thought.

"Captain?" Spock began hesitantly.

Kirk turned and Spock saw the redness of his eyes and the track of a tear on his face. Spock said nothing, knowing Kirk would speak when he was ready. The Human turned back to the tree.

Finally Kirk spoke. "Sam has been dead for months. He was my brother, Spock. My only brother, and I never even cried for him until now." Kirk paused for a moment, then turned back to Spock. "We were never really close. Never as close as you and I are. I think it's sad to have a brother and then lose him before you truly get to know him." He looked directly into Spock's eyes and continued. "I came so close to death last week. I'm glad that everything has happened as it has. We really got to know a lot about each other this past week, Spock."

"Indeed, Jim."

"While I was living with Miramanee's tribe, I learned a lot about their traditions. They had a custom for when two men of different birth families felt closer than if they had been born to the same parents. They became 'blood brothers'." He glanced at the tree, thinking of the man in whose honor it had been planted. Tearing away his attention, he looked again at Spock. "Would you go through this ceremony with me, Spock -- become my blood brother?"

"I would be honored, T'hy'la."

Kirk now more fully understood the meaning of the Vulcan term. T'hy'la -- the Vulcan version of blood brother. He reached to the ground and picked up the



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knife he had used to cut the strings around the roots of the tree. Wiping it on his pants, he then took Spock's hand and turned it palm side up. Quickly, he made a shallow cut on the forefinger and middle finger, then did the same to his own.

Instinctively, they reached their hands toward each other. Their four fingers touched, and Kirk recited the traditional words, which had been said before by countless other men. At that moment, though, they came straight from his heart, as if they were being spoken aloud for the very first time.

"I esteem thee above any other man. Friend shall I be, call me not other. This is a pledging between brother and brother." * A single drop of purplish blood, the visible result of their joining, dropped to the ground and was absorbed into the newly upturned earth.

Spock lifted his right hand tentatively to Kirk's forehead. He hesitated, looking into Kirk's eyes. Kirk smiled and nodded, and Spock continued. He placed his fingers at the touchpoints on Kirk's face, joining their minds. They revelled in their newfound closeness, then Spock began to withdraw.

Must you go, Spock? We've melded before, but it was always different.

We must prepare to leave Vulcan now, but if you do not object, I would like to keep the bond between us intact.

What does that mean?

That I will ever be with you, and you with me. Not so intrusive that we are consciously aware of each other at all times, yet if we need each other, we will both always know it.

How could I object to something like that, T'hy'la. Kirk felt the warmth as Spock responded to his use of the Vulcan term. He felt Spock backing out, then an emptiness and they became two individuals again.

When he spoke, his voice felt rusty, unused. It seemed almost a primitive method of communication. "I guess we'd better go back now, my friend. There's a whole galaxy out there, just waiting for us to discover it. Together."

"Yes, Jim. Together, now and always."



* from the movie, *Knights of the Round Table*.

TEMPLE BELLS

(To the tune of "Silver Bells")

Temple bells, temple bells,
It's pon farr time on Seleya
Ring-a-ling, hear them ring
Soon it will be Pon Farr time.

Temple maidens, Vulcan maidens,
Dressed in veils of pure white,
And they hope that this will be the season
Eyes that burn, now, men in plak tow
See the couples all run
Seven years is a long time for some!

Temple bells, temple bells,
It's pon farr time on Seleya
Ring-a-ling, hear them ring
Soon it will be pon farr time.

CHRISTMAS

NEW ENTERPRISE

(To the tune of "Jingle Bells")

Sailing through the stars
In a brand new Enterprise
All the future's ours
We will own the skies
Lights on saucer play
Making numbers bright
Seventeen-o-one-dash-A
Is warping out tonight!

Chorus:

Oh, Kirk and Spock, Bones and Scott,
Sailing through the skies
Oh what fun now that they've got
A brand new Enterprise.

In a Klingon Bird of Prey
They thought they'd take a ride
And soon they had two whales
Both safely tucked inside
The Earth survived once more
The Probe was sent away
The crew was all forgiven, then
Sent out in space to play.

Chorus (repeat)



SONGBOOK

I'M DREAMING OF A NEW STARSHIP

(To the tune of "White Christmas")

I'm dreaming of a new starship
Just like the one that used to be
With a hull that glistens, and sensors listen
For life forms through the galaxy.

I'm dreaming of a new starship
So we can make a Star Trek V
With a brand new story, that's not too gory
And a crew that's managed to survive.

I'm dreaming of a new starship
Just like the one that used to be
May they make more movies to see
And may all the tickets be free!

A NEW STAR TREK IS COMING TO TOWN

(To the tune of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town")

You better watch Kirk
You better watch Spock
We know what will work
And we know what will not
A new Star Trek is coming to town.

He's made a new ship
He calls Enterprise
Without Kirk and Spock
Who cares if it flies
A new Star Trek is coming to town.

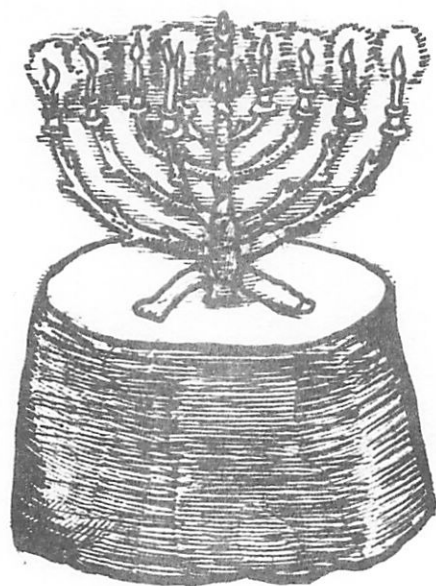
But we'll keep watching re-runs
And wait for number five
For our bridge crew are the only ones
Who will keep Star Trek alive!

So, you better watch Spock
You better watch Kirk
Gene's in for a shock
His new series won't work
Even if it's coming to town!



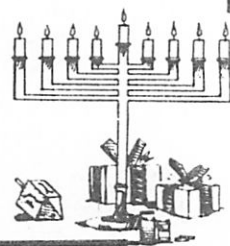


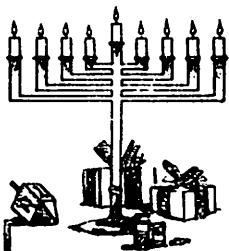
TWO FLAMES



by Ellen Morris

art by JES





The door slid quietly shut behind Spock and the lights rose gently around him. He inhaled slowly: fresh air -- or as fresh as it got on a starship. And warmth. And peaceful, restorative silence. The ship's holiday festivities held a small charm for Spock; it always seemed that this time of year brought out the very best in an already exemplary crew: their kindness, generosity, their appreciation for those around them brought to full scale. But after a certain hour, the charm wore off, and Spock retreated to his cabin for his own kind of celebration.

After taking a moment to stand and savor the silence of his cabin, he came in and set his harp in its accustomed place. He then shed and disposed of his uniform, took a quick sonic, and donned the rich, wine colored robe his mother had sent him last year at this time. It was a beautiful thing -- every time Spock put it on he appreciated its symmetry and simplicity. Long and loose, it fastened at the waist. A placket adorned the neckline, trimmed with a single, slim row of six-pointed stars all around. Soft and comfortable, it was ideal for meditation and contemplation. Because Amanda had sent it to him, he valued it all the more.

Spock knelt in the meditation alcove, and before closing his eyes, he spared a moment's glance at his fire idol. Pretty flames, small, unending flames, like other lights he remembered.

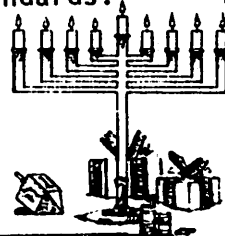
He closed his eyes and let the inner melody carry him away.

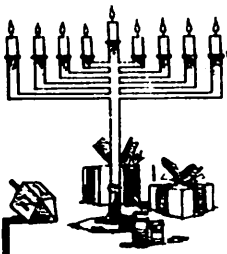


The door slid quietly shut behind James Kirk and the lights rose gently around him. Tonight's party in the hangar deck was really only a precursor to the festivities yet to come. Kirk winced at the thought, while at the same time, anticipated the celebrations ahead with pleasure. These were the times he most looked forward to on the Enterprise. The holiday spirit infected the entire crew, and the ever-present veneer of military formality and restraint slipped away like a sheet of rain over glass. It was a warm, comfortable time aboard the ship. . . and Christmas was still six days away.

The Captain shed and disposed of his uniform, and after a quick hop in the sonics, he pulled out a pair of denim pants -- his Christmas denims, he called them privately -- and a brown and orange plaid flannel shirt. He savored the feel of the soft fabric over his arms and shoulders, and the familiar -- but all too rare -- ritual of buttoning the shirt and tucking it in all around. Comfortable clothes, Kirk only wore them at this time of year to preserve their specialness for him. It was a tangible sensation, that uniqueness, as lovely and lingering as the gentle smells of Iowa hay and fresh air that he'd had scent-locked into the fabric.

He glanced at the chrono -- 22:40. It was still early by anyone's standards. In fact, McCoy had grabbed him as he'd exited the party, asking, "Why the early retreat?" Kirk had just smiled and told the doctor to enjoy himself.





The Captain had a very specific reason for leaving the party early. Turning to the counter by his bed, he retrieved the package he had stashed there. It was wrapped with blue and white paper, trimmed with a hand-tied bow, and was much heavier than it looked. For the fourth time since its arrival, Kirk gave it a shake -- nothing. Well, he'd find out what was in it soon enough.

He tucked the gift under one arm and headed out the door.



Spock rose through the layers of memory slowly, not really wanting to rise at all. His door signal had sounded, however, and it would be impolite to ignore it, since he hadn't put on a privacy lock. He unfolded himself, got up and called, "Come."

The door slipped aside to reveal his captain, dressed in what Spock recognized as Kirk's habitual holiday attire. And he carried a package.

"Good evening, Spock," Kirk said genially, but did not move. Instead he asked, "May I come in?"

"Certainly, Captain." Spock stepped aside as Kirk came into the room. As Kirk brushed past, Spock could smell the gentle scents from the clothes, alien scents to be sure, but scents he'd come to associate with his captain because they were so singularly his own. Spock watched while Kirk set down the package and seated himself. "I expected you would stay longer at the party."

"I... had something more pressing to attend to."

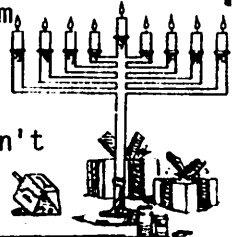
"Indeed?" Spock elevated an eyebrow. Kirk smiled.

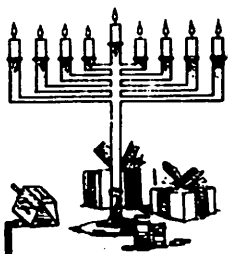
"Sit, Spock. I have something for you."

Spock sat across from his captain. Kirk's smile hadn't faded and there was a twinkle in his eyes that Spock knew all too well. Somehow he had the feeling that Kirk had come to give him another of his little lessons in humanity; Spock enjoyed these times immensely. The captain would give in to his natural propensity for society, drop by for a visit and ever have a new technique for drawing out Spock. The captain would come at these times, seeking what he referred to as "the once-a-month smile effect" from Spock. And Spock generally gave him a good fight, staying sober and sensible -- if not exactly stoic -- and then, at the appropriate moment, let just a hint of a smile come through. Spock had never been caught off guard during these visits; not once, and he delighted in the captain's persistence.

Tonight, however, Jim had brought a package -- a gift, Spock gathered -- and the approach was a bit different than usual.

"Spock, I received a shipment from your mother several days ago. She asked that I give it to you exactly six days before Christmas." The box sat between them and now Spock studied it a bit more closely: blue and white paper, white ribbon, just like every year. The paper should have told Spock that the gift wasn't from the captain. It was his mother's standard. "I've been more than a little curious about what she sent you." Spock almost smiled then. It meant that Kirk's rabid curiosity was quickly getting the best of him. No sense in not taking advantage of that. Spock folded his hands before him and didn't touch the package.





"What do you suppose it might be, Captain?" Spock asked, all innocence.

"I... can't imagine, Spock. What any mother might send her Vulcan son this time of year. Kirk shifted in his seat and folded his hands.

"Vulcan sons don't generally receive anything this time of year, sir."

Kirk smiled uncomfortably and shifted again. "Yes, of course. I should have known."

"And although Sarek was most strict about my upbringing, I did, in fact, receive gifts at this time. It would have been against every philosophical concept dear to Vulcan for my father to deny this particular ritual, since it was so very important to my mother. It was the one thing he allowed her to share with me of her human heritage. Of late I have come to believe it was more for her happiness than for mine that he allowed it, because it gave her pleasure. And the gifts were always quite practical and Vulcan in nature, though they were given in honor of a Terran festival."

"Your father practices a peculiar brand of logic, Spock."

"Captain, my father practices the purest kind of logic. It is his application that is somewhat unorthodox."

"Father and son have much in common, I see." The captain's eyes wandered back to the gift between them. "Why... why don't you open the package, and see what your mother sent to you?"

Spock did some quick inner calculation. "Because it is not quite the proper time," he answered. *And, conveniently, Jim, you haven't quite reached your patience threshold yet...*

"I didn't know there was a proper time for unwrapping gifts."

"In your own culture there is precedent for such practice, Captain. One does not usually open Christmas gifts until Christmas morning, is that not correct?"

The captain's face registered his confusion. "But Christmas isn't for six days yet."

"No, sir."

"You mean you're going to wait *six days* before opening your mother's gift?"

"Why do you automatically assume that this is a Christmas gift, Jim?"

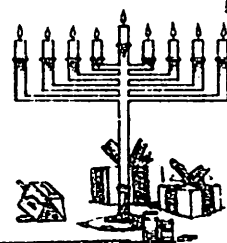
Silence. Spock could see his captain trying to find whatever it was he'd missed in conversation. But Spock just looked on, betraying nothing. "I don't know, Spock. Your birthday isn't until the middle of next year. What else could it be but a Christmas gift?"

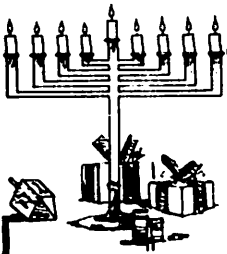
Another... four minutes now. "Jim, not all cultures on Earth observe the traditional birth date of Jesus of Nazareth."

"Oh... I see." But obviously he didn't.

"Are you familiar with the Festival of Lights?"

Dawning recognition.





"Channuka, Jim."

"What, Spock?" Surprised chuckle, shining eyes.

"By the traditional line of descent, I am Jewish, Captain."

"But... how?"

"My grandmother's name was Elizabeth Wohl. She married my grandfather, Charles Grayson. But since, in the Jewish tradition, faith is passed through maternal descent, my mother was born Jewish and named, according to tradition, after a deceased relative, my great-grandmother Allison. By that same tradition, since my mother is Jewish, so am I."

"That's extraordinary."

"How so?"

"I just... never thought of you ascribing to any philosophy but that of Vulcan."

"In the most precise sense, Jim, I don't. But neither do you precisely ascribe to the Catholic doctrine that is your heritage. Rather you observe those practices or rituals that appeal most to your personal philosophy. Judaism prescribes certain rituals that appeal to mine and that I practice for my own reasons. Perhaps their philosophic beauty appeals to me."

"But all these years, you never said a word, and it's not on your record."

"At the time those records were filed, Jim, could I have truly acknowledged any heritage but that of Vulcan?"

Kirk considered, brushing his lips with his fingertips. "No, I suppose not." Wry smile. "But why would your mother send your gift to me this year?"

Their eyes met. "Perhaps she enclosed a gift for you as well, Jim, or else she wished me to share a single gift with you."

"Why don't you open it and find out?"

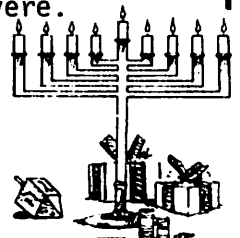
Ah -- logic at last, and the proper time.



Kirk watched as Spock reached for the gift and began to methodically unwrap it. He didn't snap the ribbon, but pulled gently until the bow came away and the ribbon dropped free. He didn't rip the paper, but rather slipped his fingers along the seams to free the fastenings. He then pulled the paper out from under the box, carefully folded it and laid it to one side.

Kirk shifted in the chair. In a human this slow unveiling would be an admirable show of restraint. The captain sensed, however, that the show was for him; Spock's well of patience was bottomless and never ran dry. Kirk resolved to persevere.

Spock had stopped unwrapping.





"You do know that the custom of giving a gift for each of the eight nights of Channuka really has nothing at all to do with religious observance."

So Spock was going to be difficult.

Kirk folded his hands patiently on the desk. "No, I didn't. Isn't that interesting?"

"In the usual sense, it has been tradition for some three hundred and fifty years, the custom having begun in the twentieth century..."

Patience be damned -- the box had been in Kirk's cabin a week and a half. He wanted to see what was inside! "Spock, perhaps you'd better open the box," he interrupted.

"Really, Captain, do you think I should?" Both those animated eyebrows rose sky-high, the expression once more childlike innocence.

"I don't want to have to make that an order, Mister."

"Well, Captain, in that case perhaps I'd better..."

"Open the box."

And there it was, just a little grin dancing at the corners of Spock's mouth. It lasted only a moment, but for that moment it lit Spock's entire face. "Yes, sir."

Spock lifted the box top away. The opening revealed thousands of little foam balls: packing material. Kirk watched while Spock burrowed one hand into the stuff. The captain inched up on his seat, his hands still folded before him. Suddenly Spock's buried hand stopped its exploration. One eyebrow lifted; he looked to his captain and said, "Fascinating!" He then began to lift out whatever it was, sending the little balls cascading over the edges of the box and all over the desk. This surprised Kirk. His first officer was usually meticulously neat. *It must be something very special.*

And then it began to emerge as the packing fell away. Kirk counted as the little candle holders emerged... one... two... three... four... on up to nine. A menorah.

It was brass, burnished to a brilliant shine, all clean lines and simple symmetry, a traditional menorah with four holders on each side of a taller one in the middle.

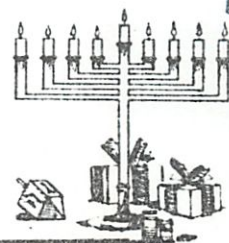
"It's beautiful, Spock," Kirk said as Spock set the menorah down on the desk.

Spock paused a moment. "It belongs to my mother," he stated quietly. He stroked the middle holder with one finger and followed it down to the menorah's base. "It's been in her family for one hundred eighty years." Kirk was watching Spock's countenance now. He was closed away, Vulcan-stoic, but his eyes... his eyes spoke volumes, black as night, black as space, they were glistening. He was moved.

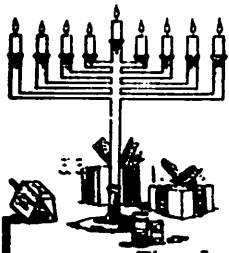
Kirk reached out and placed his hand over Spock's.

"Spock?"

The Vulcan looked to Kirk. "I haven't seen it since I left for the Academy, Jim. It simply brings back many memories."







"Why don't we make some more?" Kirk smiled. It was simply too lovely a gift to be lost in a maelstrom of uncertain remembrances. "Are there any candles?"

The look in Spock's face shifted and Kirk knew he was grateful. The Vulcan reached back in, shedding more little foam balls across the table, and felt around the box. He soon pulled out a smaller box and held it up. "Candles."

"Well, let's clean up this mess and light them," Kirk proposed, grabbing the menorah's box and brushing all the stray foam balls into it. He took the wrapping paper, put it inside the box as well, and put the box under the table.

Spock centered the menorah on the desk and pulled out two candles, one of which he placed in the rightmost holder. He took the other over to the fire idol, and lit it by the idol's flames.

"Captain, would you turn down the lights, please?"

Kirk complied, and then returned to stand across the desk from Spock. With the lights low, the candle threw a soft orange glow up over the Vulcan's face. Between the shadows cast by the flame and Spock's unfamiliar dress, Kirk felt a little as though he were in a place out of time. Silence seemed not only appropriate but requisite. They gazed at each other a moment and Kirk was warmed by the glance.

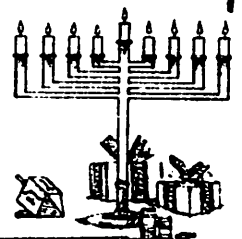
In a flash he understood Amanda's gift: she had given Spock an opportunity to share himself, his human heritage with Kirk, a special part of himself, just for the two of them. Spock could very well have taken the gift and opened it later, in private. But Amanda knew her son. Kirk felt proud and more than a bit humbled to be the repository of such trust, from both mother and son. He flattened a steadying hand on the desk and swallowed the lump in his throat. His heart was very much full.

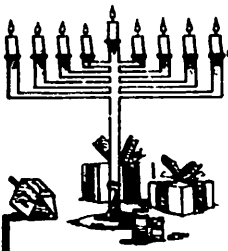
They shared the gaze a moment more, then Spock began to speak. Kirk had never heard words like these before: guttural yet fluid, with a melody and a rhythm unto themselves. Spock enunciated each syllable carefully, wrapping his mouth around the language as though it was at once new to him and yet as familiar as his own native Vulcan. Somehow there was an intimacy in this sharing. Watching Spock, listening as he spoke, Kirk promised himself that -- like a sweet stolen kiss or a private hideaway -- he would keep these moments a special secret, sharing them with no one, savoring them like the last drops from a bottle of fine old brandy. *Thank you, Amanda*, he thought warmly.

Spock was suddenly quiet. He raised the burning candle and held it to the single unlit candle, then placed it in the middle holder. He looked at Kirk once more.

"What was that, the words you spoke?" the captain asked softly

"Hebrew blessings for the holiday," Spock responded. "Hannukah is a celebration commemorating the rededication of the Jews' great temple in ancient Jerusalem after it was recaptured from the invading Syrians. Of greater importance, it is a rededication of the hearts of the Jewish people to the service of God. Although I profess no religious conviction, I understand and respect my ancestors' wishes to ... keep their flame burning, so to speak, to perpetuate their beliefs and their way of life. It takes great strength to persevere in a world where one is forever separate and different." Spock's eyes seemed to focus on some distant point well beyond the confines of his cabin, but then shifted to focus directly on Kirk. "But with true perseverance, such





flames burn brightly... " Kirk's heart twisted; Spock spoke of more than heritage and history -- he spoke of their friendship. Infinite diversity ... "Whether I embrace the philosophy or not, this ritual appeals strongly to me, and its power... never fails to move me."

They locked eyes, and Kirk smiled. *Spock: master of understatement.* "It's a beautiful ritual, Spock, never doubt that... Tonight is the first night, isn't it?"

"Indeed, Captain."

"I assume you opened your gift at the proper time."

"As a matter of fact, sir, just the right time." Kirk thought Spock looked a bit smug. He chuckled.

"Time enough to make me squirm over what was in that box."

Another innocent stare. "Quite the contrary, Captain. It was precisely the correct time to open the package and light the candles. You see, the festival begins at sundown."

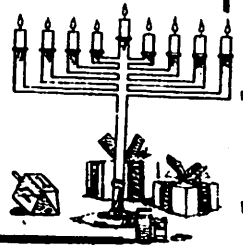
"It's nearly 23:20!"

"You are correct, however the sun set in Shikahr some five minutes and forty-three seconds ago. Your timing was quite fortuitous."

Oh. "Well, Spock... in that case, Happy Hannukah." Saying it now, for the first time tonight, the words had a whole new meaning for Kirk. He felt as though there was nothing more important or more personal he could possibly say.

"And to you as well, Jim," Spock answered softly.

And they stood in the twilight of Spock's cabin, sharing the warmth and the quiet beauty of the two flames burning between them.



☆ ☆ ☆

Star of wonder, Star of night

☆ ☆ ☆

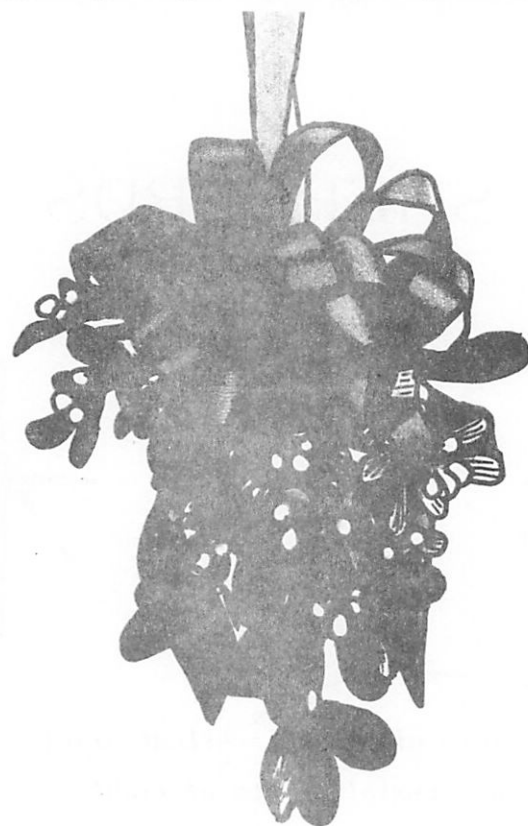


WHAT SHEPHERDS SAW

How still this night, this silent night
How cold the crystal points of light
That dot the blackness which surrounds;
I could imagine angel sounds.
So mystical -- a magic place --
This vast infinity of space
While on a pulsing deck I stand
As shepherds stood upon the land
And heavenward did cast their eyes
Toward the brilliant winter skies.
Oh, I can feel the wondrous thrill
They must have felt upon that hill
To view the awesome quietude. . .
To share this splendor side by side. . .
And feel the season's peace descend. . .
With one I call my truest friend.



Beverly J. Volker



THE TURNING POINT

by Martha J. Bonds

art by Maggie Manlove

Uhura was humming again, Spock noted as he stepped out of the turbolift and turned toward his station on the bridge. The Vulcan was tempted to sigh. Humans were so sentimental. Every year, no matter where they were, at the time Christmas was being celebrated on Earth, the crew began behaving like sentimental fools and giggling like children. They started keeping secrets, hoarding their money. Many who were notoriously poor correspondents most of the time sent lengthy and expensive stargrams home to seldom-seen family members. They also seemed to have kept track, during the last twelve solar months, of with whom they had socialized, for whom they had bought birthday gifts, and from whom they had accepted dates or presents, obviously adopting an 'eye for an eye' attitude when deciding for which crew members they would purchase Christmas gifts. And some of them groaned, verbally, loudly, to anyone in the rec room who would listen, when they felt forced by obligation to buy a present for someone they did not particularly like. It was all very illogical.

Christmas aboard the Enterprise was distinctly different from the way the date was marked in his own home on Vulcan. Having been the only one among his childhood playmates who had a Human parent, he knew his house was the only one where Christmas was even mentioned. His mother decorated, bringing out antique ornaments which fascinated Spock's artistic sensibility, and told stories about Christmases spent on Earth, and the reasons - both religious and secular -- for celebrating the holiday. She spoke in misty-eyed, nostalgic terms of something called the Christmas Spirit. Spock remembered not being able to fully comprehend the emotional idea, and he suspected his father, despite the elder Vulcan's sage head-nodding and bemused humoring of his wife's celebration, did not either.

One part of Christmas, though, was more understandable to the young Vulcan. The birth of the holy Man had been to initiate an era of Peace on Earth, and no one of Vulcan heritage could dispute the commemoration of such a day.

Yet the activities and attitudes of many of the Enterprise crew seemed to him anything but peaceful as the solar calendar crept closer to the date in question. Spock had seen that McCoy noted it, too, and -- although he had not admitted this to the doctor -- he agreed with him that the holiday seemed to bring out the avaricious nature of many of them, that the commercial side of Christmas seemed to be all that mattered.

Uhura's humming changed from one of the slow, reverent tunes Spock recognized to the lively tempo of a modern, popular Christmas song. Though it had been written during his lifetime, the lyrics contained such arcane references as 'mistletoe', which he believed to be an extinct herb, and 'Rudolph', which Chekov had explained was the name of a Russian reindeer out of children's Christmas legends. Fortunately, Uhura was only humming, rather than subjecting Spock to the inane, cheery words of the song.

The doors of the turbolift sighed once again, opening to admit the Captain of the Enterprise. Kirk looked toward Spock, flashing a smile in greeting. Spock nodded in return, thinking that one positive aspect of the holiday air permeating the ship was the effervescent good humor of his friend. They had participated in many strenuous missions in the past months, and Kirk had been too busy to escape from the tiring routine by engaging in any of his favorite pastimes. He'd had no time to read his books, to swim in the pool, and even the hours he usually spent playing chess with Spock had been reduced to mere minutes a week. He had begun to look tired and haggard, and the charming brightness had begun to leave his eyes and his voice. As Christmas approached, however, Spock was pleased to see Kirk's tensions begin to dissipate.

"I believe we'll have time to divert to Berengaria for that shopping expedition, Uhura," Kirk said, turning to the lieutenant with a smile.

"Wonderful, Captain. Then anyone who couldn't get everything on their list out of ship's stores or from Starbase 9 when we stopped there last week can finish up."

"The Berengarian merchants will appreciate the business, too," remarked Sulu, who seemed to be displaying a rather practical side of himself this season.

Spock shook his head, very slightly, and turned back to his computer readout. He spent a few moments blissfully free of Christmas chatter, then felt a presence by his side. He looked up. Kirk was standing there, looking down at him with that expression that evoked a teasing older brother. Spock didn't mind. When McCoy teased, he felt like a niggling barb was stuck in his side. When Kirk teased him, though, Spock felt the warmth he always associated with that particular Human's friendship.

"Finished your shopping yet, Spock?" There was a twinkle in the light hazel eyes.

"I do not know whether I shall tell you or not." Spock knew he was capable of teasing back. "Purchasing Christmas gifts is a totally illogical occupation, as I have said many times."

"I know." Kirk's hand settled patiently on his shoulder. "But you do remember my shirt size, don't you, Spock?"

"Yesterday, you reminded me that your collection of antique ship models was lacking a particular frigate." Spock tried to resist the curve tugging at the corner of his mouth. "And the day before that, you remarked longingly that you really enjoyed the taste of Mr. Scott's fine old scotch."

"Just making sure you have plenty of ideas," the Captain grinned.

"Some people demonstrate a total lack of maturity this time of year," Spock returned loftily. He had already purchased a gift for his friend. It had been chosen months ago on a border planet where fine woodcraft was regarded as an art. He had seen Kirk admiring the gleaming, amber-colored wood and smooth lines of a simple, yet elegant rocking chair. Although its design was antique, its proportions were modern, and it had been hewn of a single piece of wood to comfort and support

the back of the one seated in it. The chair was both beautiful and practical and it was hidden, at the moment, down in engineering. Kirk had long forgotten seeing it, Spock knew, and the Vulcan was anticipating the look of delight the Human would display upon receiving the chair as a gift.

"If you were a little boy back on Earth, you'd have gotten nothing but a lump of coal in your stocking, Spock." The new voice belonged to McCoy. Spock let the others chuckle at his supposedly humorous comment, while he turned back to his computer, the perfect picture of Vulcan seriousness.



The days passed and though there was less Starfleet business to be done aboard the Enterprise, activity among the crew became increasingly hectic as preparations for the holiday went on. Following the stop at Berengaria, Uhura threw herself into planning a Christmas party, an event which seemed to Spock as complicated as organizing a convention of delegates to Babel. There were menus to coordinate, with choices being made from holiday recipes of every conceivable Earth nationality. There was entertainment to be decided upon; both ancient and modern songs of Christmas were being programmed into the music generator computer. Games, prizes, gift exchange drawings... Spock could not follow the continuous discussions held everywhere all over the ship, from the rec deck, to the bridge, to the corridors themselves. Those were the worst; aside from being congested with knots of people in intense conversation, they were becoming clogged with lights, tinsel and baubles -- a riot of illogic called decoration. Though it seemed to make everyone else happy to see it, the disorder was distinctly unsettling to Spock.

It seemed worse than usual this year, too. While seated in Kirk's quarters going over end of year reports, Spock asked his Captain about it. "Why have you encouraged the decorating so much this year, Jim? All those non-regulation trinkets dangling in the halls... they could cause injuries should they be dislodged while a crewman is walking underneath."

"They are non-regulation," Kirk agreed, "but Scotty's seeing that they're put up safely. After the year the crew had, I decided they needed to play as much as they wanted this holiday. They'll be back to normal in a few days, and you'll be surprised how much more efficiently everyone will be working after this period of relaxation and fun."

"Logical, I suppose," Spock admitted, and although he thought the effort required to put up and take down the decorations an inefficient use of time and energy, he kept his opinion about that to himself.



The science department's eagerness for the holiday was another reason for time being used unwisely. While raising a disapproving eyebrow at his crew, Spock discharged them, telling them he would finish the yearly report himself since they had all become incapable of completing even the most simple of assignments. His frown was not taken seriously by any of his department crew, though, and he had to put up with smiling expressions of gratitude for letting them off work early.

It was two days before Christmas when Spock finally finished his report. Hungry, and noting the hour was late, he headed for one of the rec rooms, thinking that it might be empty by now. He chose a simple meal and was quietly reading from a computer disc when Uhura, Sulu and Chekov entered. As they helped themselves to coffee, Spock realized their conversation would distract him from his reading anyway, so he politely invited them to join him at his table.

They were in the middle of a discussion that he was having some trouble following. Uhura seemed extremely vexed over something.

"I just wish I could have found some on Berengaria," she complained. "It's been years since we've had any aboard and I thought surely we would find a little in the Berengaria market."

"It's hard to find nowadays," Chekov commiserated. "It has even died out in Russia."

Sulu shook his head at his friend's national pride. "There's always the artificial kind," he said hesitantly, as if not wanting to bring up that point.

"That's not the same at all." Uhura's voice was full of disappointment. "This year our theme is *authentic* Christmas traditions."

"I know." Sulu shrugged. "It was just a thought."

"I figured you'd know all about growing it," Chekov told him. "You're still into botany, aren't you?"

"I don't have time anymore, what with all my other interests." Sulu's grin was broad. "But, I do have some reference materials... come to think of it, I've heard some Federation colonies tried growing it back when they were first settled."

"That's right." Uhura turned to include Spock in the conversation for the first time. "Would you be able to get us some data on that, Mr. Spock?"

He lay down his fork and said mildly, "If I knew precisely what it is you are discussing, I might indeed be able to provide data."

"Oh!" Uhura laughed. "I'm sorry. It's mistletoe. We're trying to find some mistletoe for the party."

Spock felt his eyebrow climb into his bangs. "I was under the impression that mistletoe had become extinct."

"No!" Uhura protested. "At least... I don't think it is."

"I'm sure it survives on a few worlds," Sulu put in, "if it was planted by settlers, that is."

"You Humans forget that all life is transient. Varieties of plants and animals die out and no one even realizes it." Spock looked into three pairs of very disappointed eyes. He drew a deep breath. "Nevertheless, my own curiosity has been piqued. Shall we make a check of the computer?"

The three enthusiastic bridge crew members crowded around the science officer, offering suggestions, pointing out possibilities. It took only a few minutes to dig the needed information out of the computer banks. Several planets were listed as having mistletoe among their flora and the viewscreen displayed their locations.

"Look, Ardrella III," Sulu said excitedly. "It's in this quadrant." He leaned over Spock and punched several buttons while the First Officer attempted to smother a look of disdain. After a few quick calculations, Sulu straightened up. "We can be there in two hours at warp one!"

"We can be where?"

The heads of all four officers turned at the sound of their Captain's voice.

"Are we making a trip I don't know about, Mr. Sulu?"

The helmsman coughed slightly. "It was all Uhura's idea, sir."

"Lieutenant?"

"Mr. Spock found it," Uhura offered, passing the buck.

"Now, wait a minute," Kirk said, holding up his hands. "I want to know what's going on."

His eyes pinned Spock where he sat. The Vulcan attempted to wrap himself in dignity, drawing a deep breath before speaking.

"Captain. We have determined that Ardrella III is a source of mistletoe, which had heretofore been thought to be extinct. We are requesting permission to divert to the Ardrella system to retrieve a few samples of the plant." He watched Kirk's eyes. "For the Christmas decorations, sir."

The Captain's gaze traveled from Spock to Uhura, to Sulu and to Chekov before resting on the Vulcan again. "Very well. You may put us on course for Ardrella III. Under one condition." He paused, eyes flickering with a secret in their depths. "I will head the expedition to retrieve the mistletoe."

Uhura, Sulu and Chekov broke out in grins and laughter, seeming as excited as children being taken to see Santa Claus. Kirk smiled too, looking at Spock as if the Vulcan had just done something wonderful. Spock raised an eyebrow, the only response he could think of. Christmas made Humans behave very strangely indeed.

When the landing party assembled in the transporter room, there was a change in personnel. Chekov had elected to stay behind, in order to oversee the remainder of the party plans. And Dr. McCoy, who had heard from Kirk that they were going to search for mistletoe, had invited himself along.

"You know," he said, rubbing his hands together in anticipation, "every so often, there are perks to this job. Right, Spock?"

The Vulcan felt the elbow jab in his side. McCoy's needling had increased as the holiday approached. "Perks, Doctor?"

"Yeah. Every now and then, we get to use all the fancy equipment for our own purposes." He looked at the Vulcan through narrowed eyes. "And don't quote me some obscure regulation that says we can't."

"Not at all," Spock replied coolly. "There is no such regulation, precisely, although using Starfleet equipment for personal purposes might be considered somewhat unethical."

"Enough, you two." Kirk held up his hands in an effort to ensure peace. He stepped up on the transporter pads and his officers followed.



The colony on Ardrella III had been abandoned years ago. No one lived there now; the place was uninhabited and thus unspoiled. The original plan had been to spend not more than an hour on the planet. Spock had based this on his estimate of how long it would take the landing party, using tricorders, to locate a growth of mistletoe, allowing fifty-five minutes to admire the scenery. When he heard the soft exclamations of awe, though, he sighed, realizing that as usual, his calculations regarding Humans had been in error.

"This is beautiful, isn't it, Spock?" Even before turning to answer, he could hear the smile in Kirk's voice.

"Yes, Jim. Lovely."

And it was. The trees were huge with broad green leaves swaying in a warm breeze. The ground was covered in a soft carpeting of mosses, studded here and there with bright blossoms in vivid, jewel-like tones. It was good to walk beside his friend, enjoying the simple pleasure of sharing so much natural beauty.

With so vast an area to explore, the time passed quickly. The landing party scattered; Sulu and Uhura cataloguing flora, McCoy happily picking his way through a patch of mint for juleps "just like home", and Kirk and Spock strolling while Kirk talked of Iowa and the Christmases of his childhood.

Spock learned that Kirk's mother had kept some of the same traditions as Amanda. "Your customs -- the tree in the living room, a feast after opening presents -- are more like what my mother does than the revelry aboard the Enterprise."

"Yes, Spock. What about it?" Kirk made a gentle attempt to draw him out.

Spock sighed. "As a Vulcan, I understand tradition. It is necessary for the orderly passage of life, for teaching younger generations the great truths

and principles... but it seems that there are so many different Christmas traditions. No two people want to celebrate the same way."

Kirk grinned. "You're right, you know. But that's the point. Everyone has a favorite tradition -- usually something they did at home, every Christmas as a kid. We feel it's not really Christmas without each of our own special traditions."

"The day comes every year, no matter where one is or what one is doing..." Spock realized he was, as usual, letting his Vulcan half cloud what to a Human was a perfectly clear issue. He managed a brief, only-for-Kirk smile. "I may not fully understand, Jim, but I do try to participate."

Kirk touched his arm, but before he could reply, his communicator beeped.

"Scott here, Captain." The chief engineer answered Kirk's response. "We've got ourselves a mite of trouble."

"What's going on, Scotty?"

"It's a magnetic storm, sir. They happen often in this system, which is probably why the colony was abandoned. We calculate it's going to last 48 to 72 hours. There'll be no way to beam up any of you until it's over."

A loud groan of dismay caused Captain and First Officer to turn. Uhura, Sulu and McCoy were back and they'd obviously overheard Scott's pronouncement.

Kirk held up a hand to quiet them. "Keep us posted, Mr. Scott. Conditions down here are very pleasant. We shouldn't have any trouble roughing it for a little while."

"Roughing it?" Uhura had never sounded so appalled, Spock thought. "Captain, I can't believe we're stranded down here. Not now!"

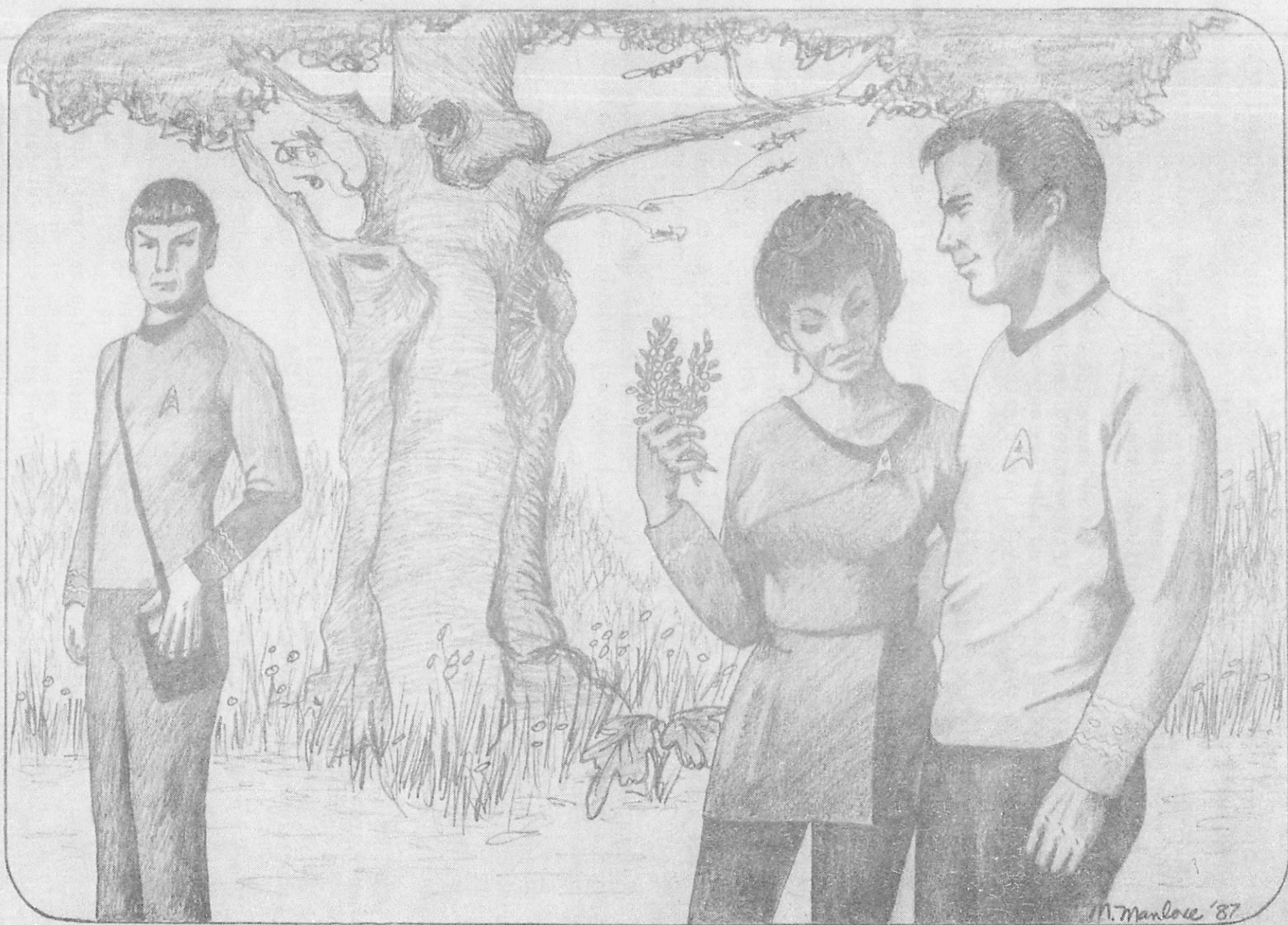
Before Kirk could reply, McCoy held up a hand, cutting in with a question of his own. "Jim, isn't there something we can do? Can they send down a shuttle?"

"No. A small craft couldn't navigate through all that magnetic interference. I'm sorry, people." He looked at them all apologetically.

"We're going to miss Christmas." Sulu sounded as aggrieved as Uhura. "Damn. And after all our hard work, we're going to miss the party."

Uhura agreed. "It just won't be Christmas with us down here and everyone else up there celebrating."

The four Humans stood around commiserating for awhile and Spock took the opportunity to put some distance between them and himself. It was completely illogical to complain and rail against what had happened to them. One would think they were children, rather than adults and Starfleet officers, the way they carried on. As he had remarked to Kirk before, the day would come and go despite any preparations or lack thereof. It was not as if this were the first time that any of the landing party had been forced to miss the Enterprise Christmas party. Spock clearly recalled an occasion three years ago... no, at the last



minute it had been possible for the bridge crew and McCoy to return to the ship to celebrate as planned, while he and the Captain had remained on Sharra II negotiating a Federation treaty.

Kirk hadn't said much about missing the holiday, but -- now that Spock went over the events in his mind -- he recalled a certain wistfulness that had pervaded the Captain's mood all that day. Yet space travel and a career in Starfleet sometimes made celebration of a holiday on the solar calendar simply impossible. Often the only alternative was to save the festivities for a more convenient time. He could never understand why his Human acquaintances stressed that doing that just "wasn't the same."

Behind him, he could still hear the voices, at least those of Uhura, Sulu and McCoy. He felt a light hand touch his back and turned.

Kirk's smile this time was sheepish. "A bit much for you, aren't they?"

"No, Jim. Not at all." Spock fumbled with the strap on his tricorder. "I simply thought someone ought to begin finding shelter and water for us tonight."

Kirk acknowledged the Vulcan's equivocation with his eyes. He turned back to the disgruntled landing party.

"All right, everyone. Let's make the best of it. We're stuck, but we might as well make ourselves as comfortable as possible. Survival procedures."

As Spock watched, the petulant strandeers became professionals once more, fanning out to begin reconnaissance of the area. Even McCoy shrugged off the disappointment, for once surprising Spock with his adapting to the uncomfortable situation. That was as illogical as their earlier discomfiture, but for Humans, it seemed a graceful way of getting over their disappointment.

Sulu held up a plant with short green leaves and small white berries. "At least we found what we came for." He raised the sprig over his head.

Chuckling, Uhura came close and brushed his cheek with her lips. Sulu responded with his own unique laughter. Spock found the display embarrassing. Uhura took the mistletoe then, and dangled it above her own head, wiggling a finger at McCoy in invitation. The doctor bowed with a flourish and kissed the Lieutenant in his turn. Then Uhura looked directly at Spock.

He didn't mind their merry-making, as long as he wasn't required to participate. Yet he didn't know how to gracefully extricate himself from the situation.

Kirk stepped into Spock's field of vision, sweeping up Uhura in a hug and giving her a resounding buss on the cheek. He turned back and winked at Spock, as the others erupted with genial laughter.

"At least we've got us some mistletoe down here," McCoy chuckled, rubbing his hands together, "even if the rest of the party is all the way up there."



Two hours later, the landing party had established a base in a large cave cut into a hillside. It was warm and dry inside, and there was a stream that would provide them with fresh water. Sulu and McCoy were looking for edible plants to cook for dinner, while Uhura checked in with Scott aboard the ship. Despite the severity of the magnetic storm, the Christmas party was to be held as scheduled.

The dismay and annoyance had passed, but so did the laughter. Uhura, Sulu and McCoy seemed to be in low spirits. Kirk had grown quiet, too.

Having nothing to do for the moment, Spock walked over to where his friend sat forlornly on a rock at the entrance to the cave. The Human looked up and gave him a small smile.

"The 'Christmas spirit' seems to be fleeting, does it not?" Spock asked, his voice quiet.

"It looks that way," Kirk agreed. "I guess it's the last thing we can let go of from our childhood. So many memories, so many traditions... we are assured of life's continuation by the way we celebrate the season every year. A change is unsettling; it feels like a loss."

"I am not sure I understand," Spock murmured. "Is not the acknowledgement of the day tradition enough?"

"Sometimes." Kirk sighed, coming to his feet. "We'll be okay, Spock. And maybe the magnetic storm will pass in time." He turned to look out at the lush, verdant plant life. "You know, Spock," he said, "this place reminds me of Val's planet, a little."

"Indeed, it does." Spock gazed at the tangle of jungle-like growth. His eyes spotted a strange flower that seemed familiar. It stood atop a large stalk, its heavy, bulb-like head bending toward Kirk who was walking in the flower's direction. *Something about that plant... Val's world...* Kirk's hand reached, as if to pick the flower.

A connection clicked into place in Spock's mind. "Jim!" He shouted a warning and headed for his Captain, arms outstretched, intending to push him out of the plant's range.

Kirk was too close, Spock's warning a split second too late. Tiny barbs shot out from the flower, embedding themselves in the chest of the man who might have picked it. Kirk flinched when they hit him, a grunt of surprise and pain forced out of him.

Spock's hands found him, caught the Human who suddenly staggered and went pale. Wide hazel eyes looked up at him and the lips formed one soft word: "Spock." Then Kirk went limp, collapsing into his friend's arms.

Spock held on, easing his burden down on the thick grass, one hand under the vulnerable neck. His fingers slid across one fair cheek and reached to take up Kirk's wrist, searching for a pulse. It was there, so fast and erratic he could barely feel it, but there.

The Vulcan looked up, ready to call for McCoy. The doctor was approaching.

"What happened?"

"Thorns." Spock pointed them out. "I tried to warn him." *'Next time just yell,'* he heard again in his memory. *'I can move out of the way as quickly as the next man.'* Kirk's long ago words on Val's planet seemed so far away. He hoped this plant was no more lethal than the one that had hit him that day had been.

McCoy was already running his medical tricorder over the unconscious form. "Poisonous," he stated, confirming fears Spock hadn't wanted to think about. He brought out a hypo and injected the Captain.

Kirk moaned a little and his eyelids fluttered, but he did not fully awaken. Spock looked up, meeting McCoy's eyes.

"It's a fast acting poison. I don't know if I got the medication into him fast enough. It's not really an antidote for this, just an all purpose vaccine."

Spock swallowed hard, his hand tightening around Kirk's as if to literally hold on to the man's life. Behind him, he sensed the approach of Sulu and Uhura. Their concern reached out, palpably, the intensity of emotion nearly overwhelming for a moment. In seconds the situation had gone from a mild annoyance to one of grave severity. Spock drew a deep breath, consciously controlling his own emotional response to the accident. His mind reached out, through his clasp on Kirk's hand, seeking the essence of the Captain, seeking life.

It was there, submerged under a blinding light that blocked normal neural functioning, but still hanging on, a mental energy that very much wanted to live. Spock closed his eyes, conveying what strength and assurance he could. It was drawn out of him thirstily by the needy mind and spirit.

"Let's get him inside." It was McCoy's voice, bringing Spock back to reality. He blinked, trying to function despite the desire to feed everything that was in him to support Kirk's life.

Together with Sulu, he and McCoy managed to lift and carry Kirk into the cave. They laid him down carefully, but a moan was wrenched from the Captain anyway. His body stirred restlessly, his features contorting as if he hurt.

McCoy's tricorder was whirring again. "Heart function, respiration, metabolism... all under severe stress. He's still unconscious, but it appears the poison sensitizes the body to pain. I can't give him any more sedation; his nervous system is already overloaded."

Spock looked up at the doctor. "I may be able to help him -- a little. I can attempt to hold his consciousness, to barrier against any pain his body may be suffering, and sustain his life functions."

McCoy nodded. "That sounds like the only hope we have. At least until we can get him up to the ship. Otherwise, this poison could kill him in only a few hours. Go ahead, Spock."

The doctor seated himself on a nearby rock and behind him, Uhura and Sulu stood quietly. Spock let his awareness of the outside world fade, sinking into readiness to take up and support Kirk's being. He knelt at his friend's side, reaching with both hands for contact points on the Human's face. His fingertips encountered a light dewing of sweat and he took a moment to stroke the furrowed forehead with a feather-light touch, brushing back the tangle of brown-gold hair.

He established contact with Kirk's mind, pushing in past a high wall of surrounding pain. Kirk's awareness was there, huddled, trying to guard against the poison's insidious touch.

Jim. It is I, Spock.

Spock! Now Kirk's mind reached with surprising strength to twine around Spock's consciousness. *The pain... I need...*

I am here to help sustain you. Spock tried to ease off, to surround the Human's mind rather than be drawn into his dynamic life force.

Kirk understood, releasing his desperate clasp on Spock's mind, allowing himself to be wrapped in the Vulcan's shelter, deliberately giving over his control to Spock. It was not in his nature to relinquish his own desire to fight against pain and vulnerability, but he saw that his own struggles could only increase the difficulty.

That's right, Spock encouraged, soothing subverbally. *Let me hold you. Relax.* He began setting up his defenses around Kirk, seeking out nerve endings bombarded with the deadly chemical.

A ripple of agony slipped through the incomplete fortress wall. Spock felt its bite and could not spare Kirk from it quickly enough. Together, they trembled, and Spock saw, as if in some fluke out-of-body vision, their two forms entwined on the cave floor. Even as his mind sought to hold Kirk's, his arms reached to enfold the Human's body in a protective embrace.

Kirk was gradually able to relax against the onslaught, and Spock was able finally to stop controlling the pain long enough to continue devising his supports. It followed him, trying to catch up as he moved around the perimeter of Kirk's consciousness, seeking entrance to the being he intended to guard with his very life.

The poison was insidious, unrelenting. It intended to force its way past Spock, to thwart his ability to protect its host. But the Vulcan would not allow it. The pain kept beating at him and he knew Kirk was still aware, still able to feel it; all he could do was cushion Kirk's essence against the worst of the torment.

As if he realized Spock was experiencing the greater amount of pain, Kirk struggled to speak to him in his mind, to distract the Vulcan from the continuous bombardment. *Looks like this trip wasn't such a good idea, my friend.*

Spock nearly smiled. *That is an almost Vulcan understatement, Captain.* He relaxed, just a little, and a tiny streak of lightning from the storm outside slipped through the web of protection. Together, he and Kirk winced from the rebounding pain.

The Human's breathing was ragged. *It's okay. It's easing up now. Are you all right?*

Certainly. I can maintain my controls...a slight shudder, caused by a tingling lace of pain...as long as necessary.

Good. Spock felt warm Human hands squeeze his shoulders. *I'm counting on that.* Kirk paused, as if drawing on inner strength. *Talk to me, Spock. If I just lie here, all I can do is feel it...*

Spock took stock, shoring up his bulwarks of defense. They both needed some distraction. *The storm will pass. Perhaps we will be able to beam up and you will recover in time for Christmas.*

It's not like you...to give out platitudes, Spock.

But have you not told me that this is the time of year for hope, the season of miracles?

Okay. Kirk's mind voice was like an exhausted whisper. He struggled to inject some levity into his words. *What did you get me for Christmas?*

Spock countered with a question of his own. *What did you get me?*

Not fair. Kirk's thoughts were more of an inner gasp. Spock held him tighter, mentally and physically. *Do not open until December 25. Wish I could...be around to see your face...*

Spock didn't like the tone Kirk was taking. He sensed the Human's consciousness slipping, feeling the pull of dread death. It wanted to claim him, wanted Spock to give him up to the hunger of the poison. But the Vulcan would not let go.

I've got you. I'm here, Jim. Can you hear me... feel me here with you?

A nod, a sigh of reaction from the suffering Human mind.

Just let me hold you, Spock went on, using his mental energy to soothe. He envisioned the worry lines on Kirk's brow being smoothed by the comfort he could provide. *Pain can touch the body, but let your mind be sheltered. I know...* He made some final adjustments in his psychic hold on Kirk, shutting out his pain, protecting his vital life functions. *Jim, he urged softly, tell me about Christmas. I...want to understand.*

A floodgate of emotion seemed to open up in Kirk, letting go of a lifetime of memory and feeling. Everything was white and cold. Spock sensed a bright haze of anticipation, eagerness for the day itself to come. Then, he felt more, physical activity -- running. In the distance, a dividing line between the sky and the land

could now be perceived. And then two shapes, tiny dark splotches of color. He reached with his thoughts and they came into focus. Two small boys... one Vulcan and one Human.

"Come on, Spock! You gotta see!" The Human child's voice was rich with excitement.

Startled, Spock looked closely at the approaching faces. He did recognize the Vulcan boy as himself at approximately age eight. And the other...those huge eyes, that bright hair, the authoritative way he moved even at such a young age... could only be one person: this was indeed the young Jim Kirk. He let his own adult thoughts merge with his child's mind and then he was running beside Jim and feeling the Human's eager anticipation of Christmas as his own.

The snow crunched under their booted feet and fresh flakes floated down on them from the Iowa sky. They ran a long way, and Spock felt the air like ice in his chest and throat, saw the puffs of white he exhaled into the winter wind.

When they reached the house, Jim bounded up the wooden steps. Spock followed, catching hold of the bannister when he slipped in the wet slush left by other boots. "Come on!" Jim urged again, holding open the old storm door.

Inside, they unwound their long woolen scarves and left them, with their coats and wet mittens, on pegs, standing their snowboots on an opened newspaper on the floor. Spock followed Jim to the kitchen.

An older woman, her hair streaked with grey, was lifting something hot and fragrant from the open oven. Spock saw the bright green mitts on her hands and smothered a very Human urge to giggle. The woman looked up then, the twinkle in her eyes reaching out, embracing both the Human and the Vulcan in him.

"Want some cookies, boys? Pipin' hot!"

"Great, Gram!" Jim was ebullient, reaching to help himself to the large sugar cookies. He handed one to Spock and took two more.

Spock tasted; the sweetness melted on his tongue. "Delicious," he murmured, overcoming innate shyness with the desire to be polite.

Jim pushed open the swinging door that led out of the kitchen. "It's in here, Spock. Gram's tree."

He followed where Jim led and found himself inside a room dark with hard wood paneling, furniture covered in fabric of bright gem tones, and accented with glistening crystal and brass. In the center of the room stood a tree taller than any he had ever seen on Vulcan, covered with flickering lights and a thousand delicate ornaments. On the floor, presents wrapped in bright designs surrounded the tree on all sides.

He watched in surprise as Jim knelt by the huge pile, lifting up one box after another, shaking them and listening as if to discover their contents.

He came close and sat beside his Human friend. "You wish to..." he groped for the right expression, "...spoil your surprise?"

Jim laughed. "'Course not. It's fun to guess, though."

"Dinner, boys."

Both Jim and Spock turned and followed the sound of happy voices into the formal dining room. There was something different, Spock noted at once. The two of them had grown, as if years had passed. Spock recognized the gangly stage he'd passed through at fifteen, and saw that Kirk was growing strong and tall, nearly as tall as his older brother, Sam, who was already there.

The whole family surrounded the table and heads bowed a moment to give thanks. When they were seated, Spock noted that one chair was empty.

"Sure is different without Gram," Kirk said wistfully. "Did you make those cookies from her recipe, Mom?"

A woman with bright hazel eyes and chestnut hair nodded, her eyes misting as she looked toward the empty chair. She put on a bright smile, though, and began to pass the laden dishes. "Sam, some turkey? How about some sweet potatoes, Jim? You'll like this cranberry sauce, Spock."

The Vulcan felt the warmth of the family enfold him, welcoming him, sharing with him their love and their bounty. He watched as the father, Kirk's father, a man with a brave face and gentle hands, carved the roasted turkey, and he felt a kinship with being Human he had never felt before. His own father's hands were precise, skilled, their motions perfect, and his mother's face was as gentle and loving as Mrs. Kirk's, but this family lived and breathed and loved together. Even without the gift of telepathy, Spock could feel their closeness, the pride and belonging that grew out of the customs shared year after year.

"Shall I pour the wine, Mother?" Sam, a youth no longer, stood tall at his father's former place. The mother who nodded her assent looked smaller, more frail, her hair as grey as her own mother's had once been.

"You carve, too, dear," she smiled, answering. "I have your favorite, Jim, sweet potatoes." And the dishes, the same fine china, cream white with a narrow gold border, were passed. The room looked different, though. The walls were pale green now, the lace cloth that had draped the table was now a shimmer of modern stain-proof textile. Spock turned to Kirk and saw that he now wore the uniform of a Starfleet cadet.

He blinked, and found himself and Kirk alone at the table now. The remains of the meal sat before them and Kirk was pouring the last of the deep ruby wine into their glasses. He lifted his own and Spock followed suit, touching the rim of his goblet to Kirk's, hearing a musical note full of poignancy and peace as they touched.

"To all the Christmases before," Kirk said softly, his eyes meeting Spock's.



"And all the Christmases to come," the Vulcan solemnly responded.

They rose and, taking their wine glasses with them, the two Starfleet officers walked back to the living room. The tree stood in the center still, but it was smaller now, and Spock didn't go too close, not wanting to be able to discern whether or not it was real. Many of the old ornaments had been replaced with new ones in the current fashion, but it still twinkled with lights and its boughs still sheltered wrapped presents.

Kirk got down on his knees to find one with a tag bearing his own name, lifted and shook it speculatively. "Chess set?" he asked, grinning up at Spock.

"You have excellent intuitive abilities, Captain," Spock replied, "but I shall neither confirm nor deny your theory. You must open the gift to see what it is."

"Okay." Kirk laughed. He put down the box and came to stand beside Spock, looking at the wide mantle over the fireplace. "Look at this nativity set, Spock. My great-grandfather bought it -- and it's been set up here every Christmas for as far back as I can remember. He's gone now, along with Gram, my parents...Sam... and so many others. But this survives."

Spock heard the soft sigh Kirk tried to suppress, and placed a comforting hand on his friend's shoulder, fingers caressing the bright hair at his nape. "It is the child," he said, touching the tiny manger with careful fingers. He looked into Kirk's eyes. "Is this Christmas?"

"This -- and our memories and traditions, too. He came to us for peace on earth -- and though it took us long enough to achieve it, we've remembered and celebrated His birth ever since."

Spock touched the gilt star that hung over the roof of the stable. "A star ... the one that shone in the east?"

Kirk nodded. "A star for men of earth to follow...so they could find Him." He tugged at Spock's elbow and they turned to look out the wall-size window at the sparkling snow lighted by the glimmer of forty million stars above. "We're still following a star..." The Human's voice trailed off in a whisper.

Spock and Kirk went back through the kitchen; the older fixtures had been replaced with an all-computerized food storage and cooking facility, but a jar in the shape of a fat Santa board a sleigh still held the familiar sugar cookies. Kirk helped himself to one and handed another to Spock.

At the door they picked up not their damp wool scarves and coats, but only a communicator and tricorder. Spock slipped the strap over his head as Kirk opened the communicator and signaled the ship.

Back in the familiar surroundings of the Enterprise, Captain and First Officer walked down a corridor together, the sounds of Christmas carols following them from the party they had left. They stopped at the door to Kirk's quarters and went in. While Kirk poured the wine, Spock moved to get a better view of the nativity arranged on a shelf.

"It's beautiful, Jim," he said, accepting a glass.

"Do you understand now, Spock?"

The Vulcan nodded. He wanted to say more, but he felt the moment slipping away as if reality was taking itself out of his control. Was this a Christmas yet to be, or one that would exist only in his dreams?

He blinked, letting out a long breath. He sat on the floor of a cave, his fingers in meld position on Kirk's pale, slack features. He sank into their joined minds again and felt the continued battering of the poison that sought to destroy Kirk's life. He tested the defenses he had set, and found them holding.

Jim? he called, fearing that Kirk had slipped from his grasp despite all he had done.

I'm tired, Spock. So...tired. Can't fight...anymore...

I shall fight. You may sleep. He paused, calling up the vision of themselves as children playing in the snow. *Tomorrow is Christmas, Jim. Think of Christmas... and all that the spirit of Christmas means.* He gently relinquished his hold on Kirk's consciousness, easing the Human into a safe slumber, wrapping his own love and strength around the life he held so dear.

He backed out of Kirk's mind slowly, making sure he still held the worst effects of the poison at bay. It wasn't easy to just let go. He was closer to Kirk now than perhaps he had ever been; they were bound together mentally, emotionally now, the same way their mutual respect and admiration joined them in the waking light of day.

A turning point in his life, Spock knew. He finally understood what his mother had tried to teach him so long ago. *The spirit of Christmas lives in us all...*

"Spock? Are you back, Spock?" It was McCoy's voice, helping him return to full reality.

Spock sat up slightly, blinking in the light of phaser-reddened stones. He sat beside Kirk's reclining form, both his hands enfolding one of the Human's, their fingers plaited together. He wouldn't let go.

"I am here, Doctor." His voice sounded rough, but whether from emotional or physical pain, he was not sure.

McCoy bent on the other side of Kirk, scanner running. "He's stable. But he's not out of the woods yet." He turned to the others. "Damn. Sulu, when does Scott say that storm's gonna be over?"

"At least another 24 hours," came the response in the helmsman's deep bass. He checked his chronometer. "And it's only six hours until it's officially Christmas."

Those hours passed slowly. The others ate sparingly of the vegetables they had gathered and cooked, but Spock remained at his friend's side, still holding that precious life between his own hands. Kirk's condition had not worsened, but without life support equipment from the ship, the Vulcan's healing and protective skills were all they had.

Midnight was approaching, the hour of Christmas. In the dimly lit cave, Uhura's soft voice began a murmur, no more than a hum at first. Spock turned to regard her quizzically and she broke off at once.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock," she said, looking flustered.

"No. It is perfectly all right, Lieutenant. I am sure the Captain would want you to sing, especially now. Please continue. Sing the words. Perhaps the song will provide comfort... for all of us."

She began to sing, and Spock's eyes returned to Kirk's sleeping face. Was what he had done enough to sustain him, Spock wondered, feeling the weight of worry hang heavy on his shoulders. Would Kirk awake undamaged, or would the poison continue to erode the controls Spock had set until it invaded all systems of the Human's body and killed him? Spock closed his eyes, willing such thoughts away, turning his attention to the words of Uhura's songs.

She sang for what seemed like hours, as the night wore on. Sometimes McCoy and Sulu joined her, but only on the lighter, more secular tunes. Along with Spock, they seemed to prefer the peace of the hymns and the way Uhura's solo voice caressed the ancient, beautiful notes. Her alto polished the old words like brass ornaments buffed to a glow and the scenes depicted by songs sung a hundred thousand times brought vivid memories to the hearts of her listeners.

Sulu cleared his throat as Uhura paused a moment. He was checking the time again. "It's after midnight." He turned from the singer to meet McCoy's eyes.

"Merry Christmas, Sulu." The doctor spoke solemnly. "Merry Christmas, Uhura."

The others murmured in response. Then they turned toward Spock, where he sat at their fallen Captain's side. They looked like any Humans would at a time like this, Spock reflected, anxious, hopeful, and a little sad. He inclined his head, unable to wish them good holiday in return, just at the moment, yet he had no wish to hurt them or let them think he regarded their words as inappropriate. He swallowed hard, and a phrase came to him. His mother had repeated it many times, but he had heard it said by Captain Kirk as well. "Peace on Earth," the Vulcan whispered, "and good will toward men." He met the dark eyes of the communications officer. "Please sing another," he requested, letting his eyes go back to Kirk's face.

She began, filling the quietude with peace and a sense of the continuation of life and belief in a power greater than man.

*"Oh, little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight."*

The last notes rang out clear in the silent cave. Spock had turned to watch Uhura, admiring the emotion she showed fearlessly as she sang. He was about to express his gratitude, when he felt a slight squeeze on his hands.

He whirled to find Kirk's eyes open and focusing on him. They seemed awash with moisture. Spock bent close to him, whispering his name.

"Jim? Are you awake? It's Christmas."

"I know." The hoarse voice shook. When the wide eyes blinked, tears escaped from their corners. "I heard Uhura... That carol...my mother's favorite. Always makes me think of her... "

Sulu and Uhura had moved in close and McCoy bent down to give Kirk an examination.

"Looks like the poison has worked itself out of your system," he grinned down at his patient. "Spock here is worth a hundred fancy life support devices."

Kirk's eyes were fixed on the Vulcan's face. "Yes. I think that's true."

McCoy called the ship to let Scott know the Captain would be all right and he groaned, along with Uhura and Sulu, when informed by the chief engineer that they still couldn't be beamed aboard for another twelve hours. The storm was abating, but Christmas aboard the Enterprise would take place without them.

Scott was saying something about Chekov having put it to a vote, the crew deciding to wait for the missing Captain and crew members to hold the party. Kirk waived for McCoy's attention and spoke into the doctor's communicator when he held it near.

"Belay that voting business, Scotty. Let them have the party. They deserve their Christmas to go on as planned, as per tradition. When we get back, we'll just start the celebration all over again." He grinned tiredly at Uhura when he finished.

"Tell them to save some turkey for us -- and that we're bringing the mistletoe!" she told the engineer. When the conversation ended, she and McCoy and Sulu set about fixing a late night snack.

Spock stayed at Kirk's side, his eyes intent for any sign of pain on the Human's face.

"I'm okay, Spock. Thanks to you, once again. Merry Christmas, my old friend." Kirk's lips formed a tired smile. "'Fraid you'll have to wait awhile to get your present from me, though." The teasing light came back into his eyes.

For Spock, it was the best thing he could imagine seeing. "I have my Christmas gift, Jim," he said simply. It was not only a turning point in his understanding of Human custom, sharing the Christmas spirit, but in understanding another portion of his own Human soul. He didn't know how to put it all into words, but suspected Kirk understood anyway, and remembered the long Christmas dinner of the past they had shared in the meld. "Merry Christmas, Captain." Spock's words were fervent and full of caring.

Kirk's face reflected his happiness, and his eyes still teased. "What about my gift, though? You don't have it on you, do you?"

For a moment, Kirk looked to Spock like the curious little boy trying to tell what was in a box he was shaking. "No. It is aboard the Enterprise," he told him, mock-sternly, "and you will not be able to hear it rattling in its container." He allowed himself a small smile, bright with Christmas joy and teasing of his own. "But I believe you will like it very much, Jim."

"What is it?"

Kirk could be so single-minded. Just like a Human. Spock would have to tell him someday how much Vulcans enjoyed keeping secrets.

★ ★ ★
**a star, a star
shining in the night** ★

★ ★ ★



PERSONAL LOG

Ginna LaCroix

What a party!
My sickbay'll be busy tomorrow.
Thank god for the Romulan cure for hangovers!
I'll be two short, though.
I was wondering where they were
So I went looking for them.
We'd been through so much of recent times. . .
Spock dying. David dead.
The Enterprise gone. . .
Then, Spock bein' so weird. . .
Well, he was always a little that way.
Time travel -- almost worse than transportin'.
Court martial.
Then back here.
Some say the day of the miracle is over
But, with Jim around, I should be used to them by now.
It took a while but I finally found them.
Observation deck. . .silently lookin' at the stars,
Side by side. . .
They were so absorbed that I didn't want to intrude,
I merely raised my glass in silent salute
To what must be, for all of us,
The happiest of Christmas seasons.

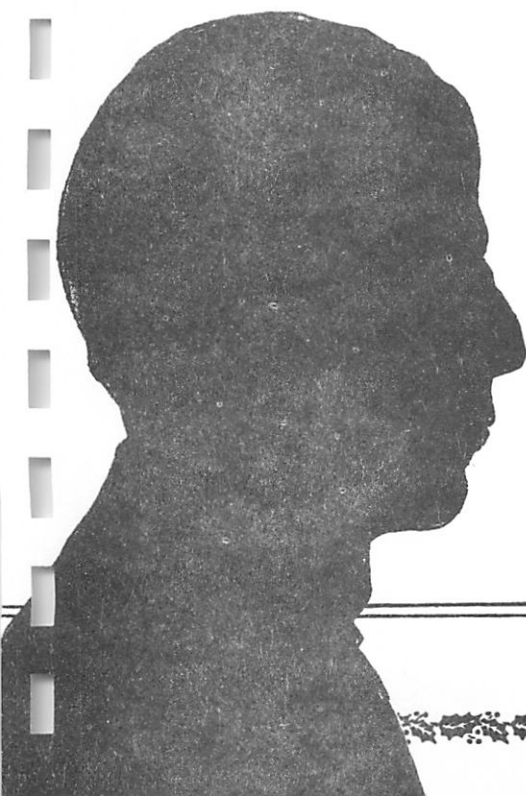


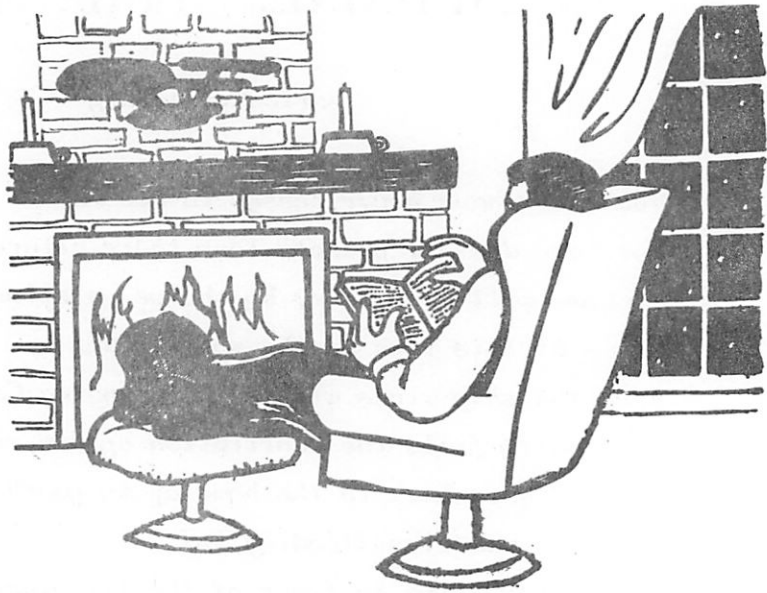


TO SHARE THE STARS

Marion McChesney

The stars have never ceased to awe me,
Nor have distant planets lost their allure.
My home will always be, by choice, a silver starship.
Yet - at this time of the solar year,
When the ship rings with voices singing Caroles,
And Scotty fills the ventilation system with the scent of pine,
My mind goes back to the home of my youth
Bringing memories flooding in.
I remember lying in front of the fireplace,
The snow falling heavily outside the window.
Stringing popcorn for the tree, singing. . .
and my family beside me.
I miss those times and wish. . .
But, no. . . as much as those days meant to me. . .
and always will. . .
I would not live them again without you beside me. . .
For sharing is most of the joy of Christmas,
And the rest is a true friend for the sharing.





A CHRISTMAS CAROL

by Beverly Volker

art by Steve Wilson

The old man whirled around with surprising agility at the unexpected and unsolicited jingling sound behind him. Keenly eyeing the sea of young faces staring up at him, his gaze rested formally on the most guilty looking cadet.

"Mr. Cratchett, is there a problem?" The clear, authoritative tone indicated that the man was not as "old" as his rank and demeanor implied. Mr. Cratchett stood to face his instructor, nervousness clearly apparent.

"No, sir, no problem." There was a sudden tinkling as he shifted position and a string of bells slipped from a hurriedly devised hiding place in his desk and clattered to the floor. None of his classmates even smiled at the young man's discomfort under the critical eye of their teacher.

"Regulation, Mr. Cratchett?"

The cadet shook his head while still attempting to stand at attention. "No, sir, they're... uh, Christmas bells."

The Old Man was not placated. "I know *what* they are. I am, however, unclear on what they are doing in my class."

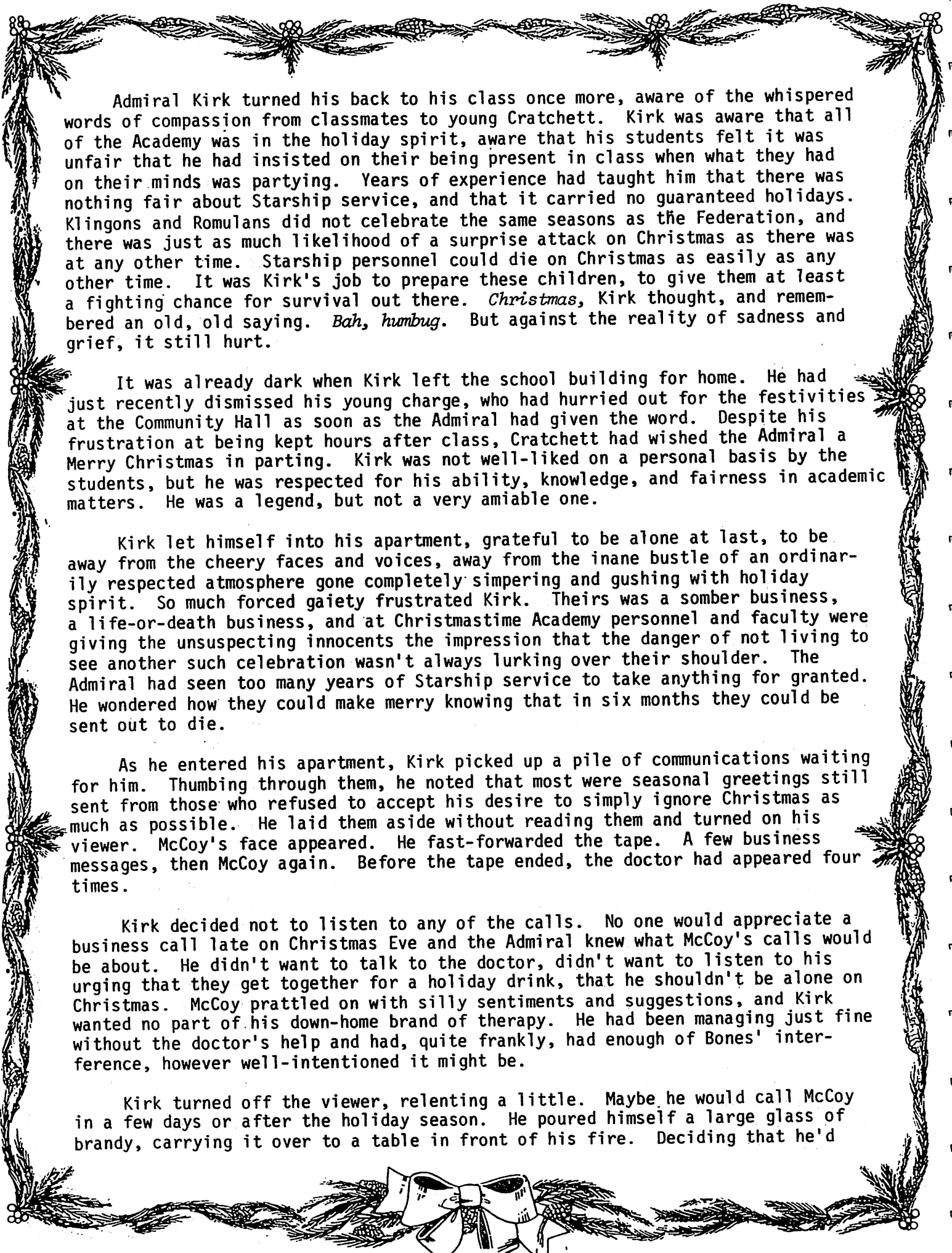
Cratchett knew an explanation was expected. "I... uh, brought them with me, sir, because several of us are going over after class to help decorate the Hall for the Christmas Eve party tonight. Most of the others are already there..."

"I am aware of what is going on at the Hall this morning," the teacher broke in. "However, you and the twenty other cadets in this room have a class until twelve hundred hours, and I do not expect your frivolous holiday festivities to encroach upon my valuable time -- time which I had set aside to try to impart to you some small measure of information that may one day save your necks."

Cratchett and the others groaned inwardly at their instructor's tirade, anticipating a forthcoming lecture on the hazards of space service, or the importance of classroom attention or some other weighty issue that was completely out of line with the crime of smuggling bells into the class on Christmas Eve. Both instructor and students were aware that this was the only scheduled class at the Academy on this day. All others had been cancelled for the holiday celebration. Only the Old Man had refused to give them the day off and would most likely have insisted on teaching on Christmas Day had he not been overruled by Academy policy.

The expected lecture did not come, however. Instead, the Old Man straightened his glasses on his nose, narrowing his eyes to peer intently over them, giving him once more the illusion of advanced age and intolerance.

"Pick up the bells, Mr. Cratchett, and after class you may remain to secure the room for tomorrow's absence. Perhaps during that time you may be able to adequately explain to me what was so important as to interrupt our lesson today for four point twelve minutes. The rest of you will please resume solving the tactical problem on your screens."



Admiral Kirk turned his back to his class once more, aware of the whispered words of compassion from classmates to young Cratchett. Kirk was aware that all of the Academy was in the holiday spirit, aware that his students felt it was unfair that he had insisted on their being present in class when what they had on their minds was partying. Years of experience had taught him that there was nothing fair about Starship service, and that it carried no guaranteed holidays. Klingons and Romulans did not celebrate the same seasons as the Federation, and there was just as much likelihood of a surprise attack on Christmas as there was at any other time. Starship personnel could die on Christmas as easily as any other time. It was Kirk's job to prepare these children, to give them at least a fighting chance for survival out there. *Christmas*, Kirk thought, and remembered an old, old saying. *Bah, humbug*. But against the reality of sadness and grief, it still hurt.

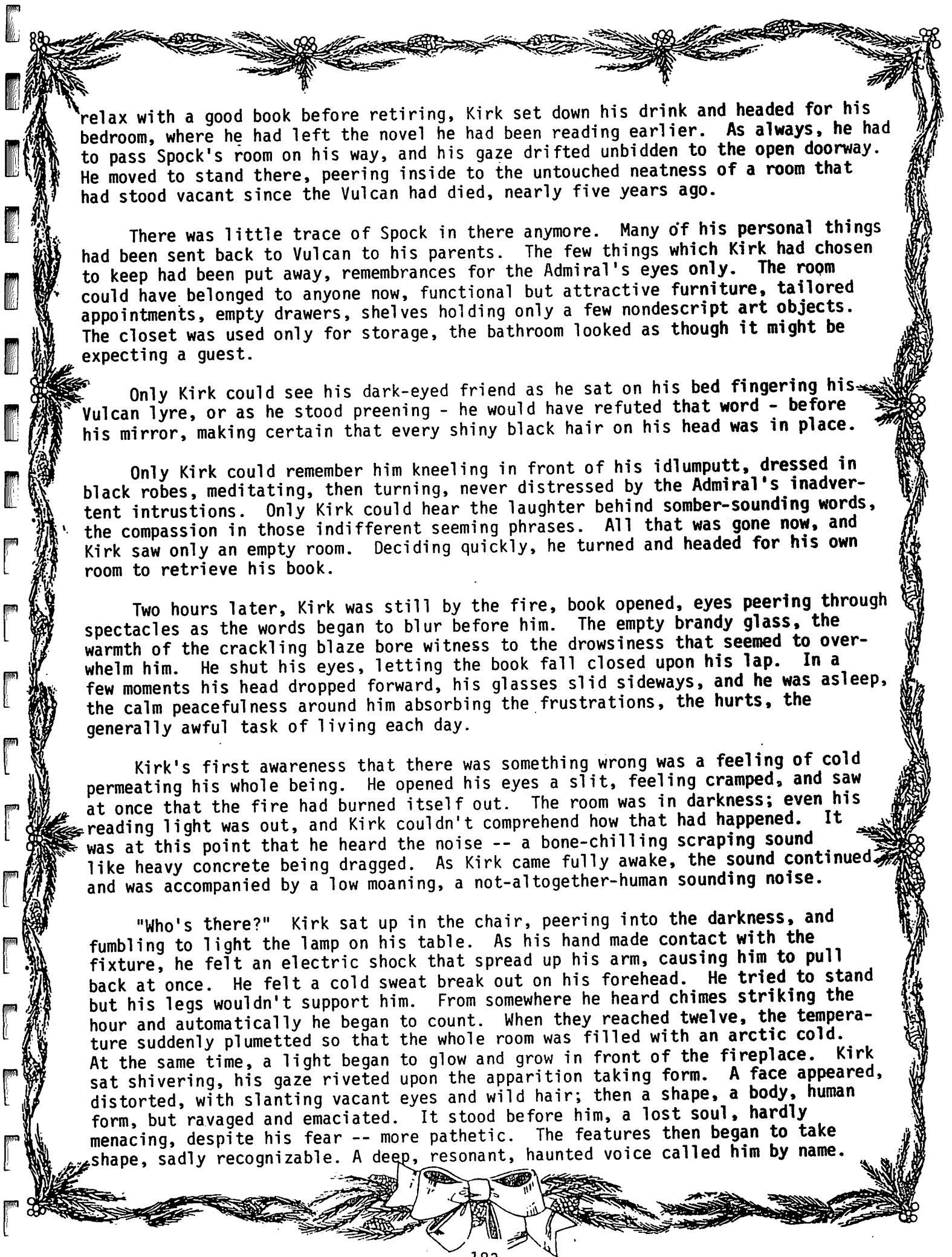
It was already dark when Kirk left the school building for home. He had just recently dismissed his young charge, who had hurried out for the festivities at the Community Hall as soon as the Admiral had given the word. Despite his frustration at being kept hours after class, Cratchett had wished the Admiral a Merry Christmas in parting. Kirk was not well-liked on a personal basis by the students, but he was respected for his ability, knowledge, and fairness in academic matters. He was a legend, but not a very amiable one.

Kirk let himself into his apartment, grateful to be alone at last, to be away from the cheery faces and voices, away from the inane bustle of an ordinarily respected atmosphere gone completely simpering and gushing with holiday spirit. So much forced gaiety frustrated Kirk. Theirs was a somber business, a life-or-death business, and at Christmastime Academy personnel and faculty were giving the unsuspecting innocents the impression that the danger of not living to see another such celebration wasn't always lurking over their shoulder. The Admiral had seen too many years of Starship service to take anything for granted. He wondered how they could make merry knowing that in six months they could be sent out to die.

As he entered his apartment, Kirk picked up a pile of communications waiting for him. Thumbing through them, he noted that most were seasonal greetings still sent from those who refused to accept his desire to simply ignore Christmas as much as possible. He laid them aside without reading them and turned on his viewer. McCoy's face appeared. He fast-forwarded the tape. A few business messages, then McCoy again. Before the tape ended, the doctor had appeared four times.

Kirk decided not to listen to any of the calls. No one would appreciate a business call late on Christmas Eve and the Admiral knew what McCoy's calls would be about. He didn't want to talk to the doctor, didn't want to listen to his urging that they get together for a holiday drink, that he shouldn't be alone on Christmas. McCoy prattled on with silly sentiments and suggestions, and Kirk wanted no part of his down-home brand of therapy. He had been managing just fine without the doctor's help and had, quite frankly, had enough of Bones' interference, however well-intentioned it might be.

Kirk turned off the viewer, relenting a little. Maybe he would call McCoy in a few days or after the holiday season. He poured himself a large glass of brandy, carrying it over to a table in front of his fire. Deciding that he'd



relax with a good book before retiring, Kirk set down his drink and headed for his bedroom, where he had left the novel he had been reading earlier. As always, he had to pass Spock's room on his way, and his gaze drifted unbidden to the open doorway. He moved to stand there, peering inside to the untouched neatness of a room that had stood vacant since the Vulcan had died, nearly five years ago.

There was little trace of Spock in there anymore. Many of his personal things had been sent back to Vulcan to his parents. The few things which Kirk had chosen to keep had been put away, remembrances for the Admiral's eyes only. The room could have belonged to anyone now, functional but attractive furniture, tailored appointments, empty drawers, shelves holding only a few nondescript art objects. The closet was used only for storage, the bathroom looked as though it might be expecting a guest.

Only Kirk could see his dark-eyed friend as he sat on his bed fingering his Vulcan lyre, or as he stood preening - he would have refuted that word - before his mirror, making certain that every shiny black hair on his head was in place.

Only Kirk could remember him kneeling in front of his idlumputt, dressed in black robes, meditating, then turning, never distressed by the Admiral's inadvertent intrusions. Only Kirk could hear the laughter behind somber-sounding words, the compassion in those indifferent seeming phrases. All that was gone now, and Kirk saw only an empty room. Deciding quickly, he turned and headed for his own room to retrieve his book.

Two hours later, Kirk was still by the fire, book opened, eyes peering through spectacles as the words began to blur before him. The empty brandy glass, the warmth of the crackling blaze bore witness to the drowsiness that seemed to overwhelm him. He shut his eyes, letting the book fall closed upon his lap. In a few moments his head dropped forward, his glasses slid sideways, and he was asleep, the calm peacefulness around him absorbing the frustrations, the hurts, the generally awful task of living each day.

Kirk's first awareness that there was something wrong was a feeling of cold permeating his whole being. He opened his eyes a slit, feeling cramped, and saw at once that the fire had burned itself out. The room was in darkness; even his reading light was out, and Kirk couldn't comprehend how that had happened. It was at this point that he heard the noise -- a bone-chilling scraping sound like heavy concrete being dragged. As Kirk came fully awake, the sound continued and was accompanied by a low moaning, a not-altogether-human sounding noise.

"Who's there?" Kirk sat up in the chair, peering into the darkness, and fumbling to light the lamp on his table. As his hand made contact with the fixture, he felt an electric shock that spread up his arm, causing him to pull back at once. He felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. He tried to stand but his legs wouldn't support him. From somewhere he heard chimes striking the hour and automatically he began to count. When they reached twelve, the temperature suddenly plummeted so that the whole room was filled with an arctic cold. At the same time, a light began to glow and grow in front of the fireplace. Kirk sat shivering, his gaze riveted upon the apparition taking form. A face appeared, distorted, with slanting vacant eyes and wild hair; then a shape, a body, human form, but ravaged and emaciated. It stood before him, a lost soul, hardly menacing, despite his fear -- more pathetic. The features then began to take shape, sadly recognizable. A deep, resonant, haunted voice called him by name.



"Admiral James Kirk."

From somewhere, he found a voice to reply, disbelieving. "Spock?"

The apparition nodded. "Yes, it is me."

"What... what do you want, Spock?"

"As always, I have come to help you, to save you."

"Save me?" Kirk was shivering. "Save me from what?"

"From yourself. From this kind of existence. Jim..." the voice was husky, hardly recognizable as Spock's. "You have become a bitter man, almost cruel and uncaring. It is not like you, but unless you change, this will be your plight."

"Cruel? Uncaring? The only thing I am now is cold. Did you bring this cold with you?"

Spock nodded. "I exist in cold. It is my purgatory."

"Well, that's a switch." Kirk had managed to stand, his courage returning. "What are you, Spock - that corned beef sandwich I had for supper, the glass of brandy?"

"I assure you, I am real. I am Spock, your friend."

"Spock is dead. This is the twenty-third century and Starfleet Admirals do not talk to ghosts." Kirk's voice was bitter. He was not enjoying this nightmare.

"Jim, I have come to warn you. This night, which Humans call Christmas Eve, you will see yourself as others do -- as you were, and as you are now."

"Why should I care how others see me?"

"Because it is a mirror to your soul."

Kirk shook his head. "You don't sound like Spock. Spock never talked of such things."

The apparition nodded. "I know, and I should have. I never let others see what I was really feeling, never showed that I cared. That was wrong. Now I am paying for that lack. I am as cold as most people believed me to be."

"I never believed that."

"I know. That is why I have been given this chance to save you. You were the one person who really knew me."

"You were my...friend, Spock. I've...I've missed you." Kirk walked around the room. "I'm...I'm talking to a damn nightmare!"

"Jim, I know you still do not believe. I have something to show you. When it is over, I will come back and we will talk." Spock's form began to fade. Kirk stared in horror.

"No... no, Spock. Don't leave. Please, don't go. Stay awhile... please... don't...leave...me..." The vision was gone. For a moment, the room was in total blackness and Kirk felt the desolation of losing Spock, even his ghost, once more. Then, suddenly, the fireplace blazed to life, the reading lamp came on, and warmth once more filled the room. Kirk barely had a chance to sigh in relief when he heard another strange sound, this time a high-pitched tinkling. Lounging in the second chair was a tiny, familiar dwarf dressed in a Roman tunic. Kirk stared in amazement.

"Alexander?"

"Yeah, Admiral. I didn't think you'd remember me." The dwarf grinned, pleased.

"What have you been doing? How did you get in here?"

Alexander jumped to his feet. "That's not important. But *why* I'm here is. I want to take you on a trip."

Kirk shook his head, backing away. "'Fraid not, Alexander. This has been one strange evening, and I don't know what's going on, but I'm not going anywhere with you or anyone else."

Alexander reached out for Kirk's hand. "Please, Admiral. It's important. Besides, if you remember me, you remember that Platonians could make you do anything, whether you wanted to or not."

"But you didn't have the power," Kirk objected.

"Not then, but I do now. Besides, I told you it was important. Spock said to do this even though you'd object."

As Alexander's tiny hand closed around Kirk's fingers, the room around them began to fade. Grey clouds swirled, then at once they were transported through time and space. Kirk's apartment was gone, replaced by another setting which, even in his astonishment, Kirk recognized immediately.

"It's...it's the Enterprise."

Alexander nodded. "Right you are."

Kirk looked around in amazement. "It's a corridor, just outside the main rec room. Not like it was just before we...we lost her, but years ago when I was...Captain. Before the remodeling, our first five year mission..."

"Right again," Alexander said. "I hear music. Shall we go inside?"

Kirk was hesitant and eager all at once. "I'm not sure I want to."

"It's the annual Christmas party. Second year of your command."

They were all there -- all the familiar old faces, looking young as Kirk had not seen them in many years. Uhura was leading Christmas carols in the center of a group, her youthful bronze face glowing in the lights from a large, decorated tree. Montgomery Scott, many pounds slimmer and sans the grey salted mustache, was giving a lecture on the virtue of Scotch to Chekov who, Kirk realized, looked no older than his students at the Academy. Sulu, Chapel and... Bones. Kirk's breath caught in his throat at the sight of his friend. He had always thought of McCoy as looking older, but this animated physician was no comparison to the gaunt, lined man he had just seen on his viewscreen. The years of fighting sickness and death had taken their toll on that compassionate man. Kirk turned to Alexander.

"How can this be?"

"You are looking at a Christmas Past. Don't worry, they can't see you. Not as you are now, anyway." Alexander drew his attention to the doorway. "But you were there."

Kirk followed Alexander's gaze and saw himself -- or rather, his former self -- entering the festivities. He was thirty-four, with a bounce to his step and a twinkle in bright, hazel eyes. His hair was lighter, his body well-developed by daily workouts. He was laughing, turning to talk to someone who followed him. Spock.

The Vulcan was as Kirk remembered him so well; tall, with clearly angled features. His black, shiny hair was perfectly groomed with straight bangs. For the occasion he had worn a soft, blue velvet tunic over regulation trousers and boots. Kirk's own green brocade was a tribute to the colors of the season.

Kirk could hear what his younger self was saying. "Aw, c'mon, Spock, give us a break and look like you're enjoying yourself. Christmas only comes once a year."

A Vulcan eyebrow lifted. "For you, Captain. For Vulcans it comes not at all."

"But you're on a ship full of Humans. At least give us the benefit of our customs."

Spock was prevented from answering by the arrival of McCoy. "Well, well, well. I see you convinced our First Officer to attend the party, Jim."

Kirk grinned. "It took all my powers of persuasion, Bones."

McCoy addressed the Vulcan. "Now that you're here, Mr. Spock, maybe you'll lighten up and have a good time."

Spock drew a breath. "I do not anticipate such an occurrence. I am here, as you are aware, because the Captain requested it. He felt my presence would be morally beneficial to the crew."

McCoy laughed. "So that's the tack he used. Gotta hand it to you, Jim. It was a good ploy. By the way, Captain," he leaned conspiratorily close to Kirk, "have you seen that cute little Helen Noel over there?"

Kirk winked at Spock. "Can't say I have, Bones, but I'll make a point to do so."

McCoy drifted away and Kirk's attention was back on Spock. "Shall we check out the food table? I asked that there be some vegetarian dishes for you."

Spock nodded. "Thank you, Captain. That was thoughtful of you."

"That's how we Humans get at Christmas time."

Kirk watched as his younger self and Spock moved to the buffet. Crewmembers came up to wish them well and the young captain responded with cheer.

"Those were the parties. The ones we had aboard the Enterprise," the Old Man told his small companion wistfully, "dancing until our feet wore out, singing until our voices were hoarse..."

"And you were the authority on that ship," Alexander reminded him.

"Yes, but it was important for the crew to see that you were one of them, too. It was good for morale and..."

"Good for command, too?"

Kirk nodded. "It was what I kept trying to tell Spock." He watched as Uhura approached the two young senior officers.

"Mr. Spock, I was hoping that you might have brought your lyre tonight to accompany some of the caroling."

Spock shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm not familiar enough with your Earth tunes to play them, Ms. Uhura."

The communications officer was disappointed. "They're not difficult to play, and with your ear for music, I'm sure you could learn them very quickly." She turned to Kirk. "Captain, can't you persuade him to join us?"

Kirk turned on his most charming smile. "Mr. Spock, I agree. How can you turn down this lovely lady? Couldn't we possibly prevail upon you to favor us with your talents on this special occasion?" He knew he had the Vulcan. Spock sighed, mumbled a rather reluctant agreement and excused himself to retrieve his harp.

Uhura turned to Kirk and gave him a hug. "Thank you, Captain. I knew if anyone could convince him, you could."

Kirk returned the hug. "I think we slipped that one over on him pretty well."

The Old Man chuckled. "Ha! Spock never could outsmart me. Always thought he could, but I could cut through that Vulcan veneer anytime."

"You were quite a charmer, all right," Alexander agreed. They watched then as Spock returned and the singing commenced. The songs were melodious and familiar and the Admiral soon found himself humming along with *Deck the Halls*, *Jingle Bells*, and *Silent Night*.

After awhile, Spock and Uhura finally declared the need for a break, and the First Officer drifted back to seek out his Captain.

"That was beautiful, Spock," Kirk told him. "Thank you for playing." Spock stood stiffly for a moment, as though he had something on his mind. "What is it?" Kirk perceived his friend's hesitation.

"Captain," Spock cleared his throat. "I understand that at Christmas, the Human custom is to give gifts to those whom one... holds in esteem..." Kirk waited. Spock produced a small gold foil wrapped box. "Please...accept this with my wishes for the season."

The Old Man's eyes gleamed. "I know what it is! A lucite cube with a silver Enterprise inside. I still have it. It was...was the first gift Spock ever gave me."

Alexander touched the Admiral's arm. "It's time to go."

Kirk looked at him with dread. "Go? No, please, let's stay a little while longer."

Alexander shook his head. "I'm sorry, but you have much more to see tonight and it's getting late."

"I don't want to go back. I want to stay here on the Enterprise with Spock, with my friends. Alexander, we were so young. Life was full." Tears filled the Old Man's eyes.

"Christmas was love and joy," the dwarf agreed.

"Yes."

"Remember how you felt?"

"I remember. I don't want to leave."

"You have to. It's time." He reached for Kirk's hand once more and once more the grey mist swirled around them.

"No-oo-oo..." Kirk protested as the Enterprise faded. "I can't." He put up his hands to cover his eyes as Alexander disappeared as well. He felt the arctic cold again, and he dropped to his knees, hunching over against despair and sorrow. He was empty and alone and lost and all the happy Christmases were past and gone. From somewhere, he heard chimes, but he was too distraught to even count them.

"C'mon, you can't stay there. It's getting late." The voice was impatient. Kirk opened his eyes and looked up. Before him stood a dark-haired youth neatly dressed in the uniform of a senior cadet.

"Who are you?" He managed to gain a measure of authority to his voice despite the agony he was feeling.

"My name is not important, sir. My mission is. I'm here to take you on an adventure tonight, and our time is growing short."

Kirk frowned and got to his feet, drawing himself up with dignity before the young man. "Adventure? Aaa-hh. Sorry, Mister, my days - and nights - of adventure are over."

The cadet sighed and nodded. "I know." The two words were almost insubordinate and Kirk returned an indignant scowl.

"Oh, you do, do you? Well, let me tell you something, Cadet, when you've logged as many Starfleet hours as I have -- "

"Please, sir, " Mr. Adventure cut in, "I don't mean to be rude, but it really is important that we get going."

"Going, where?" Kirk was intrigued in spite of his annoyance.

"Here." The young man waved his arm and he and Kirk began to levitate. In a moment, the grey mist around them dissolved and they were hovering over the buildings of Starfleet Academy. Above them the night sky was clear and bright with thousands of twinkling stars. Below, from the Community Hall, sounds of music and laughter wafted upward. Their bodies descended slowly until their feet touched ground just outside the building.

"Why are we here? I don't want to attend this stupid Christmas party," Kirk objected. "If I'd have wanted to be here, I'd have come earlier, and in a more conventional manner."

"We'll only stay a few minutes," his guide informed. "There's something you should hear. Then I have more to show you."

"Wonderful." Kirk's voice was sour, but his whole evening had been so bizarre that he was beginning to suspect that objecting would be useless.

"Shall we go inside?"

The Admiral shrugged. "Why not?" Just inside the door to the main ballroom, Kirk observed a group of his students at the center of which was Cadet Bob Cratchett. When they did not look his way, Kirk turned to his companion. "Can't see us, huh?"

Mr. Adventure shook his head. "No, sir. You catch on fast." There was a trace of admiration in his voice.

"That's what made me an Admiral, sonny."

The group of cadets were talking animatedly and Kirk turned his attention back to them.

"The Old Man sure was hard on you today, Bob," one remarked. "Not even Christmas could soften that old Scrooge's heart."

"Aw, he's just a lonely old man," Cratchett defended. "I guess Christmas doesn't mean much when all your friends and family are gone and there's no one to share it with."

"Yeah, but you don't have to take it out on those who still enjoy life and fun. Wasn't he ever young and full of the holiday spirit?"

"I doubt it," someone put in.

"He probably was a real tyrant on the Enterprise," another added.

"Bet his crew looked at their assignment on that ship as a prison term," someone else speculated. "Tow the line or it's extra duty from the Captain... and Christmas? Shore leave? Forget it! Five years of hard labor without any time off for good behavior." The group laughed at the cadet's exaggeration. Only young Cratchett did not join the joke.

"No, you're wrong," he cut into their frivolity. "It wasn't like that at all. You've all heard the stories about the Enterprise, how it was the best ship in the fleet, how the crew was so loyal to Kirk it was a phenomena. He couldn't have been that tough and still accomplish all they did."

"Just stories, Bob," one of the young men disagreed. "You're too gullible. They feed us that stuff so we'll look up to our superiors and want to be like them. I've been in Kirk's class for two years now, and I've never seen any evidence of his being human. I'll bet that Vulcan friend of his would have been more understanding than Kirk's ever been."

"Vulcan friend?" One of the other cadets laughed. "Come to think of it, who else could have been friends with Kirk but a tight-assed Vulcan." The group joined in the joke.

Observing, Kirk clenched his fists in anger. "Young smart alecks, what do they know! Tight-assed Vulcan, Enterprise tyrant! How dare they! They have no concept of what we had, what we were..."

"That's right," Mr. Adventure nodded. "They have no way of knowing what the legend was really like. They have only their own experiences and observations to draw from. Kirk stopped, his anger dissipating, replaced by wonder. "They never knew Spock, never saw you in command of a ship," the young man continued.

"But... but Cratchett seemed to understand," Kirk argued.

"He appears to be a young man with a lot of potential. Could be a good leader someday, if he's given the proper incentive." Mr. Adventure let the Admiral consider for a moment, then touched his arm. "C'mon, I told you we would only stay here a few minutes. I have one more thing I want to show you before I leave you tonight."

"Leave me?" Kirk did not receive an answer. Instead, the grey mist swirled in again, the Hall and its occupants faded, and he and his guide were transported through a shimmering vortex. When their surroundings came into focus once more, Kirk recognized the Space Port lounge in which they had landed. It was a busy, crowded bar, gaily decorated for the holidays and filled with Starfleet personnel

exchanging seasonal greetings and toasts. Kirk's cadet took his arm and led him through the crowd to a table near the back. He recognized its two occupants immediately. The younger of the two men was speaking.

"The receptionist at your apartment building told me I'd find you here, Leonard. I'm glad I did." McCoy reached out and covered the other's hand with his own. He smiled.

"I'm glad you did, too. It's good to see you, Peter. But why aren't you home with your wife and children? It's Christmas Eve."

Peter frowned. "I thought maybe if I came in person I could convince Uncle Jim to come home with me to spend Christmas with us. I've called him several times, left messages. He doesn't respond. Since Anne's folks died, he's all the family we have. I'd kind of like the kids to have a chance to know him like I did."

McCoy shook his head. "He's changed, Peter. You know Spock's death five years ago - so unexpected, so untimely - really was the straw that broke the camel's back. After all Jim went through, losing David, the Enterprise, that whole mess with his career just to get Spock back - only to lose him again less than a year later in that damned accident - this time irretrievably so, a cruel irony. Well, it was too much. It finally broke him. Your uncle's a survivor, Peter, and it's the only thing that's kept him going. But he's not the same man. He's bitter, cynical... alone. He's withdrawn and he won't let anyone near him. God knows, I've tried."

"But you suffered, too," Peter argued. "You've had losses..."

"And I'm a bitter, cynical man, too." McCoy took a gulp of his drink. "But then, I always was. Jim was full of life and hope and he kept us all going. He was the one who wouldn't stay down, who always found the answer. Now..." He shrugged.

Peter gazed morosely at his own drink. "I was hoping you could help me convince him to come home with me tonight."

McCoy smiled, seeming to change the subject. "How's your youngest, Jim's namesake?"

Peter was thoughtful. "Well, the surgery you performed on him made a big difference, but little Jim's such a tiny fellow. You know I've always thought that if Uncle Jim could spend some time with him, roughhouse, play with him the way he did with me when I was so dispondent during those weeks on the Enterprise after my parents' death... Jimmy's such a frail kid and I don't seem to be able to impart that zest for life the way Uncle Jim used to do. I keep thinking he might be the best medicine my son could get."

McCoy shook his head. "That would have been true once, Peter, but I'm afraid that avenue is closed, now. Jim just doesn't have it in him anymore."

Peter looked sadly into the soft blue eyes. "Listen, Leonard, even if we can't get Uncle Jim to join us, why don't you come to our house for Christmas. You know we think of you as family, and you could see our tiny Jim for yourself."

McCoy grinned. "Well, boy, I thought you'd never ask. You tell that Anne of yours to set another place at the table for old Doc McCoy and I'll be there in time for dinner tomorrow."

Peter stood, touching his friend's shoulder. "She'll be glad to hear that."

McCoy sobered. "Peter, I'm sorry about Jim. I...I just don't think there's anything we can do." Peter nodded and left quickly.

Kirk turned to his companion, a lump forming in his throat. "I don't want to be here anymore." His voice was cold.

"It isn't necessary," the cadet agreed. "And it's time I left, too."

The grey mist swirled in once more and Kirk shut his eyes in protest. "Enough! Stop! I'm tired. I want to go home." He felt himself falling, floating away into nothingness. He longed for the security of his own bed, the safe haven behind the wall he had built around himself. And yet he knew instinctively that he was not to be granted such sanctuary on this Night of Nights. Somehow he sensed there would be more agony before this experience was over. Spock had said he would come again, and for the first time in his life the anticipation of a visit from his lost, beloved friend filled him with dread.

The swirling, falling, weightless sensation stopped and Kirk felt a cold dampness beneath him. As he opened his eyes he heard the chimes again, tolling somewhere in the distance. He was lying on his back on the ground, outdoors somewhere, and there was a light mist of rain falling through a grey and gloomy sky. He wiped moisture from his face and sat up, puzzled. A dark robed figure was moving toward him, its face hidden by a deep hood. The being stopped and extended a hand, pointing in the direction of a hill a few meters away.

"What now?" Kirk complained. "And who the hell are you?" The being moved off a little way in the direction of the hill, then paused and turned as if expecting him to follow. It did not speak. Kirk got to his feet, shivering.

"I suppose you want me to come with you. Damn, it sure is cold out here, and I'm getting wet." As he moved toward the figure, it turned so that it led the way. Kirk climbed the hill and at the top he saw that a deep hole had been dug. The being stopped in front of it and Kirk came up alongside.

"What is this place and why have you stopped next to this..." He paused, looking around. "A cemetery? An old time cemetery, military from the rows of white markers. What's the meaning of coming to a place like this?"

The hooded figure turned, gazing down the far side of the hill. An entourage of military personnel was making its way slowly toward Kirk and his guide. Six of the officers bore a coffin. Kirk watched the company approach but they were still too distant to recognize.

"A funeral? Who died?"

His companion lifted hands and pulled back the hood to reveal its face. Kirk stared in astonished recognition. "Saavik?!"

Her eyes were deep set, haunted, brows slanting upward. Still, she did not speak and her face showed no expression. She turned a cold gaze on the Admiral, then once more faced in the direction of the funeral party. As they drew closer, Kirk could make out faces. They were all unfamiliar except for one. A frail, gaunt man was being helped up the hill by a younger officer.

"McCoy! It's McCoy!" Kirk turned to Saavik. "Why is McCoy here? And what's wrong with him? Why does he look so old, so sick?"

Saavik did not answer, and Kirk was growing angry. "You sure don't talk too much, do you? Well, you'd better answer me! You'd better tell me what's happened to my friend! And... who died?"

The funeral cortege reached the top of the hill, and the coffin was placed over the grave. Kirk peered at the strange, somber faces. Only McCoy looked upset, but he also seemed so ill that it was hard to tell the cause of his grief. An honor guard went through a military ritual for burial, then the Federation flag was removed from the coffin, folded, and handed to McCoy. He accepted it, then turned misty blue eyes to the man who had been helping him up the hill.

"Aren't you going to say something, some words over the grave or something?"

His companion, who wore Commander's stripes, shook his head. "The weather is bad, Doctor, and your health is not good. You shouldn't be here at all. I don't think we should stay any longer."

"You let me be the judge of that, Baker! I'm the doctor around here, not you." McCoy looked at the coffin, frowning sadly. "Damn it, the man was an Admiral... gave his whole life to Starfleet. He was a legend, a hero. He deserves more than this at his funeral!"

Kirk stared at the coffin, then back at McCoy's face and, suddenly, horrified, he knew. Terror filled eyes looked to Saavik. "It's me. It's my funeral! I'm seeing my funeral! How can this be?"

Baker put an arm around McCoy's shoulders. "There was a proper ceremony at the Academy. His career and exploits were eulogized."

"By strangers! By no one who knew him... or cared," McCoy protested.

"The Admiral may have been a legend, Doctor, but he was also a recluse. He shut out everyone, never had a kind word for anyone. I'm afraid there just wasn't anyone around who knew him well enough to call him a friend."

Tears slid from the pain-filled eyes as McCoy stared wordlessly at the steel grey coffin.

Baker shrugged. "Even his own nephew wouldn't come to his funeral. When we contacted him about his uncle's death, he said he hadn't heard from him in years. He said his uncle never cared about him or his family. Said he never even acknowledged them when their youngest son, the Admiral's namesake, died. Technically, Peter Kirk is the sole heir -- and I understand the Admiral's assets are ample. But his nephew told us he didn't want a penny, said all his uncle's money couldn't bring back his son, couldn't make up for the time Kirk never gave

the little boy. He told us to turn over the estate to the Academy." Baker hunched down against the chill and rain. "I'm sorry, Doctor. I know you cared about him, but I'm afraid you're the only one who did. Let's go now, please."

Kirk was filled with grief. "Tiny Jim died? Saavik, why did that happen?"

Saavik only stared, but her normally expressionless countenance was a reflection of his own sorrow. There was something else in her eyes, too. Accusation, blame.

Kirk looked away. "I know. I should have... visited them more often. They always made me feel welcome. That little fellow was so sickly, but he always brightened when I was around. He loved my stories about the stars, and..." Kirk's eyes lifted toward McCoy as his old friend was guided away from the gravesite. The doctor's hunched figure faltered and he swayed unsteadily as Baker moved to support him.

"Easy, Doc. I told you that you shouldn't be out here. Just hold on, and we'll have you back in your nice warm room at home in no time."

"Home? You mean a damn prison for the terminally decrepit!" McCoy muttered before a spasm of coughing took away his voice.

"Oh, Bones, I'm sorry..." The words were choked by tears as Kirk watched him go. Then suddenly he turned to Saavik. "This is the future, isn't it? This is what's going to happen." Saavik did not reply, but her expression told him he was correct. He brightened as an idea formed. "If it's the future, then it hasn't happened yet. It could be changed by what I do now, in the present, right?" He wasn't certain. "Or... is it predestined? Is it already too late? Saavik, I need more information. We've dealt with time-lines on the Enterprise. I need to know..." Saavik's form began to shimmer and fade.

"No! Don't go, Saavik, stay here! I need your help! I need to know what can be done..."

As Saavik faded from sight, the grey mist swirled in again. He stood in it, then the cemetery and the hill began to fade as well. The grey mist deepened until it became black. All around him was the blackest black he had ever encountered. No stars twinkled as they had in the deepest of space. No shadows, no visions. Only blackness, surrounding, enveloping. He was blind and deaf and without senses. He could not feel or think. He was empty. He did not exist, and the void of his soul stretched out into eternity. *This is death.* From somewhere deep within the thought began to form. Then sounds came back -- the chimes again. A feeling of fear intruded and was joined by grief.

Kirk began to sob, his body wracked with pain for the lost and happy times of Christmas Past, for the empty loneliness of the Present -- a self-imposed isolation, to wallow in self-pity. But most of all, Kirk cried for the Future that would be the result of his actions, for the people he would continue to hurt by his uncaring ways.

"Jim." The voice was gentle, compassionate. "Jim, listen to me. Time is growing short."

Kirk looked up at that beloved sound, the voice he would never forget, the voice he heard sometimes in his sleep. He felt warm now, safe.

"Spock, I understand what you were trying to show me. But...but can I do anything about it?"

Spock's vision floated before him, surrounded by an aura of light. He no longer looked wild, haunted, as he had appeared earlier. Instead, he was a reflection of himself as he had been in those days of glory on the Enterprise; the old science blue uniform well-fitted over a lean, muscled body.

"This is as it can be, Jim. If I can save you from the condemnation of eternity then I will be saved as well. There is still time for you to change the future, and by doing so you will ensure that we will be together as we were before."

Kirk gazed at his soul mate. "Spock, it's been so terrible. I couldn't believe it when they came to tell me you'd been killed." His voice caught. "I thought, 'haven't I given enough? What else can happen?'... David was so young... my son... and the ship. It was just a piece of machinery, but it held so many memories, so much of our lifetime. It was gone, too, and it was like we had no past, like all those days and adventures didn't exist." He drew a shaky breath. "So I decided I wouldn't let myself care about anything anymore. That way, I couldn't be hurt again. And you know, once you decide that, once you pull away, it gets easier. Or so I thought."

Spock's eyebrow rose. "Jim, that is not your way. You taught me to care. Taught me the meaning of love. Too many people love you and care about you. For those whom you have lost, others have been given to you. And the loss is only temporary, just as is everything in life. In death, when your time comes, I can offer you a permanence which exceeds anything you have ever known. This is my Christmas gift to you."

Kirk grinned. "You always did come up with the most original ideas. And what can I give to you?"

"I think you know." Spock folded his hands behind his back. "Finish living your life as you were meant to do and then we will be together again. The wait will be short for me."

"But long, for me?"

"I think you will find so much joy in living that it will seem not nearly long enough. The years will pass quickly."

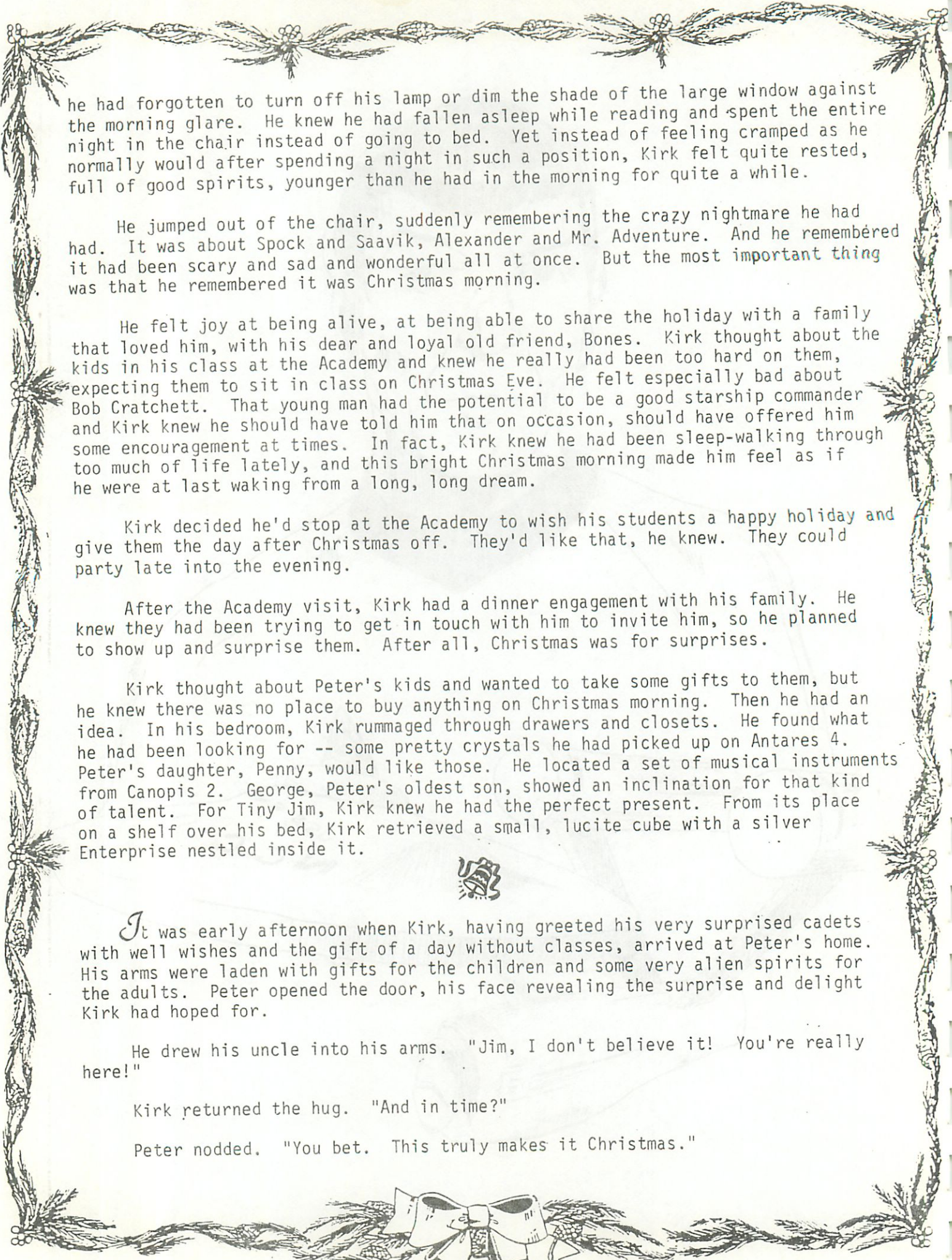
It was Kirk's turn to lift an eyebrow, a reaction he had learned from the Vulcan. "Years?"

The vision of Spock began to fade and suddenly Kirk felt himself growing very tired. He shut his eyes, wanting sleep to come. "G'night, Spock. Merry Christmas..." The words were mumbled as he breathed in the deep peacefulness of slumber.



When he awoke, bright rays of sunlight were dancing through the huge window wall overlooking the bay. He was in his chair in front of the fireplace. Book and reading glasses had fallen to the floor, the fire had burned itself out, and





he had forgotten to turn off his lamp or dim the shade of the large window against the morning glare. He knew he had fallen asleep while reading and spent the entire night in the chair instead of going to bed. Yet instead of feeling cramped as he normally would after spending a night in such a position, Kirk felt quite rested, full of good spirits, younger than he had in the morning for quite a while.

He jumped out of the chair, suddenly remembering the crazy nightmare he had had. It was about Spock and Saavik, Alexander and Mr. Adventure. And he remembered it had been scary and sad and wonderful all at once. But the most important thing was that he remembered it was Christmas morning.

He felt joy at being alive, at being able to share the holiday with a family that loved him, with his dear and loyal old friend, Bones. Kirk thought about the kids in his class at the Academy and knew he really had been too hard on them, expecting them to sit in class on Christmas Eve. He felt especially bad about Bob Cratchett. That young man had the potential to be a good starship commander and Kirk knew he should have told him that on occasion, should have offered him some encouragement at times. In fact, Kirk knew he had been sleep-walking through too much of life lately, and this bright Christmas morning made him feel as if he were at last waking from a long, long dream.

Kirk decided he'd stop at the Academy to wish his students a happy holiday and give them the day after Christmas off. They'd like that, he knew. They could party late into the evening.

After the Academy visit, Kirk had a dinner engagement with his family. He knew they had been trying to get in touch with him to invite him, so he planned to show up and surprise them. After all, Christmas was for surprises.

Kirk thought about Peter's kids and wanted to take some gifts to them, but he knew there was no place to buy anything on Christmas morning. Then he had an idea. In his bedroom, Kirk rummaged through drawers and closets. He found what he had been looking for -- some pretty crystals he had picked up on Antares 4. Peter's daughter, Penny, would like those. He located a set of musical instruments from Canopis 2. George, Peter's oldest son, showed an inclination for that kind of talent. For Tiny Jim, Kirk knew he had the perfect present. From its place on a shelf over his bed, Kirk retrieved a small, lucite cube with a silver Enterprise nestled inside it.



It was early afternoon when Kirk, having greeted his very surprised cadets with well wishes and the gift of a day without classes, arrived at Peter's home. His arms were laden with gifts for the children and some very alien spirits for the adults. Peter opened the door, his face revealing the surprise and delight Kirk had hoped for.

He drew his uncle into his arms. "Jim, I don't believe it! You're really here!"

Kirk returned the hug. "And in time?"

Peter nodded. "You bet. This truly makes it Christmas."

From the other room, someone else came to see who was at the door. Blue eyes twinkled, brimming. "Well, I'm mighty glad you decided to spend the day with your family." McCoy rocked on his feet.

"With all my family," Kirk answered. He touched McCoy's arm. He felt a tug on his tunic and looked down to see a small boy peering up at him.

"Uncle Jim, Daddy said he didn't think you'd be here today, but I knew you'd come. I wished it, and wishes always come true on Christmas."

Kirk smiled, stooping down to be on eye level with the child. "You're absolutely right. And I've also brought you a present. It's a very special present from someone who was a very special friend to me. After dinner I'll tell you all about him and the adventures we used to have..."

McCoy watched, grinning. He caught Peter's gaze and winked. "And God bless us, everyone."

A SNOWY MORN

GINNA LeCROIX

*Snow gently falling,
Ice crystals patterned in infinite combinations.*

*"Isn't it great?"
"My nose is cold."*

*Bells jingling on leather harness,
Rhythmic crunching of horse's footsteps.*

*"Nothing like this on the ship!"
"Are you certain you know how to navigate?"*

*Gentle rolling pathway bordered by trees,
Branches weighed low by their white burden.*

*"Wish Bones had come."
"He knew better."*

*Swishing sound of sleigh blades running through snow
Followed by a quiet chuckle.*

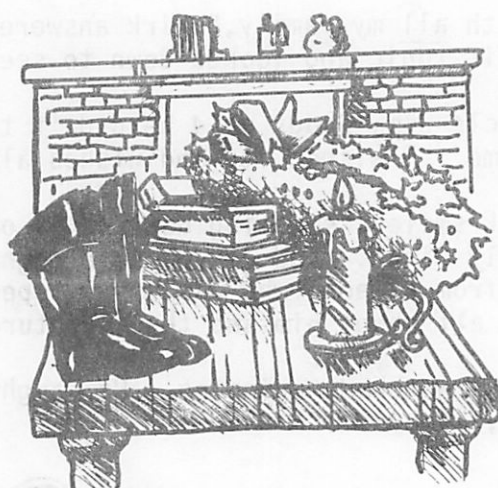
"I'm glad in a way."

*A long silence
Before brown eyes met hazel.*

"So am I."



The GIFTS of the



WASE MEN



by Nancy Kippax

art by Pat Cash





Night obscured the city. The driving wind sent needles of pain into the exposed areas of Kirk's face. Long woolen scarves secured head and neck, but could not cover completely. Even his hands, thrust into pockets, and his feet, boot-clad, felt the tingle of prolonged exposure to the frigid air.

Depression settled over the aging Starfleet Captain like an extra cloak which provided no warmth. McCoy was beginning to seem more and more correct - and prophetic - in his opinions of their lifestyles. Perhaps it was time to slow down and take it easy.

He had believed it himself, once. Hadn't he told Spock - 'Galloping around the cosmos is a game for the young.' Yet now that sentiment, that Jim Kirk, seemed a lifetime ago, an age apart.

Puerta del Diablo - 'the Devil's Gateway' - that was what they called this grim colonial planet in the Procyon star system. It was a border world, a link between Federation territory and Romulan space. In addition to being the homeworld for a number of average Federation citizens, it was also a planet of intrigue, covert smuggling, piracy and greed. As Kirk glanced up and down the dark street, he wondered again why they had accepted this assignment.

Grimly, he trudged through the cold, dirty streets which led back to the rooms he was sharing with Spock. Knowing that the Vulcan would have a hot cup of tea waiting made the going easier. Indeed, knowing that the Vulcan was waiting made all the going easier. Spock, returned to him from the dead, so miraculously here again, had changed Kirk's life. Every day now seemed precious, new and fresh, even days as terrible as this one had been. Thoughts of Spock lightened the feeling of depression.

Substantially cheered, Kirk could be optimistic enough to consider that it wouldn't be - it couldn't be - too many more days before Aquarius showed up and they could be off this world.

Admiral Cheney, long a friend of Kirk's, had asked him to take this delicate assignment. An operative, code name Aquarius, had run into trouble across the Romulan border. Starfleet had a plan to get him out, as far as *Puerta del Diablo*, but they needed a team to take him from there back to headquarters for vital debriefing. Kirk had consulted with Spock and together they had worked out the details for their end of the mission, the final leg from the border to Starbase 5.

As he neared the street where they were living, Kirk stepped up his pace. This area was not so bad as the pre-arranged meeting spot. Rooming houses, transients predominated, yet there was a community spirit, also. In the past several days, Kirk had noticed signs of an impending holiday celebration. When he had inquired, he had discovered that this was the Christmas season on *Diablo*. Tonight he was struck by the number of new colored lights, decorations, and pyro-technic displays which evidenced the approach of the centuries old celebration. It made him feel warmed and yet homesick at the same time.



He wound his way up three levels of metal steps on the outside of a tall old blood-red building and pressed a tiny plastic square to the lockplate. 'Home' at last.





Spock rose from one of the beds where he had been sitting and quickly crossed the room.

"You are late," he adminished, lending his warm hands to help Kirk unravel the scarves, unfasten the coat, unhook the many layers into which he had bundled himself.

"I thought I'd give...Aquarius...a little...extra time tonight." Kirk's teeth chattered slightly as the warmer indoor air met his chilled flesh. Spock brought him the anticipated cup of tea, led him to sit on the edge of one of the beds. When Kirk continued to shiver, the Vulcan drew a blanket over his shoulders, bringing the edges over his lap.

"You must not allow yourself to become so chilled," Spock fretted. "Haven't we had enough setbacks on this mission?"

Kirk nodded glumly. From the start, things had gone wrong. On their first night here, Spock had been attacked on the street by robbers. He had fought off his assailants, but not before they had removed all his cash, the only accepted method of payment on a border world, his boots, his civilian tricorder. Someone in their building had loaned him an old pair of worn-out boots which barely fit, but that limited the amount of time he could spend outdoors. Their finances were greatly curtailed with the loss of half their funds. Yet these difficulties could have been acceptable if only Aquarius had shown up in a day or two as they had expected. Unfortunately, it had been nearly a week and there was still no sign of him.

"Look-- I want to show you something." Spock squeezed his shoulder in encouragement, rose and crossed to the table. He came back with a small box filled with soft, round cookies which smelled heavenly.

"Where -- ?" Kirk began.

"Mrs. Okeefe made them. Her son, Lucifer, brought them up a little while ago. He is quite an intelligent lad. Did you know he's proficient with binary linguistic code? We talked and -- "

"Spock!" Kirk was aghast. "You didn't say anything to give away our -- "

An eyebrow cocked indignantly. "Really, Jim! I was not... 'born yesterday.' " The corners of his mouth twitched as he tried to repress a smile. "Well, at least not literally. Figuratively, I suppose one could say that I am newly born."

Kirk never ceased to be amazed by Spock's ability to joke about his death and rebirth. Vulcans certainly found humor in the strangest places.

Reaching into the box, Spock proffered a cookie to Kirk, holding one for himself. "Lucifer said this is a Christmas custom. I am not familiar with it."

"With what? Christmas or the custom? Do you remember our holidays together?"

"Of course. My memories are all intact, I've told you that." Spock was thoughtful. "It's just... sometimes the *meanings* are gone. I remember an event and wonder *why* it was done. All of your prized emotional rationale seems to be lost."

"But you're learning," Kirk encouraged.





"Indeed. Sometimes, I think, too well." Spock took another cookie. "But tell me about Christmas customs. I know we exchange gifts," he prompted.

"There are so many.. " Kirk considered. "Centuries of changing practices. Did you know, for example, that once people would cut down a live tree and bring that into their homes instead of an icon? In fact, they used to chop down hundreds - raised for that purpose, of course - and stand them up on lots for people to select one like we select a melon or apple."

"We always had a tree - an artificial one - on the Enterprise," Spock recalled. "And the crew would decorate it."

"Do you remember the year you designed the new treetop ornament in the form of the IDIC with a star behind it?"

Spock nodded, smiling slightly, "Ye-es...yes, I do." He was pensive. "Will we be celebrating Christmas here? Lucifer said it is the day after tomorrow."

Kirk shrugged. "I don't know. I don't think so. It's not *our* Christmas. I mean, this isn't when *we* celebrate it. I'm not sure why they do, here."

"My impression was that it was not the actual date, but the feeling that signified the holiday," Spock persisted.

"I just want to get Aquarius and get the hell out of here," Kirk rebuffed. "That will be Christmas present enough." Standing, he began to get ready for bed.

Spock turned out the lights. "Of course. Good night, Captain."



The schedule had been set up to allow Aquarius two opportunities each day to rendezvous with them on Diablo - noon and midnight. Every twelve hours Kirk or Spock would go to the deserted railroad yard and wait for perhaps thirty minutes. It was a brisk ten minute walk, so the entire procedure filled only about two hours of each day. The rest of their time was occupied with trying to be as inconspicuous as possible. For the most part, this entailed the tedium of killing time in their room. Lucifer Okeefe, the boy from the floor below them dropped in to visit with increasing frequency as their stay had stretched out. It was plain he was intrigued by the apparent difference of his new neighbors; the boy was perceptive enough to recognize that Kirk and Spock were not the typical transient tenants who usually took rooms there.

He was back again this morning, his eyes shining eagerly as he asked permission to visit.

Kirk was amused by him, but had not been able to relate to him on an emotional level. Perhaps all young boys would forever remind him of David, he considered. Acting the father figure was a role he shunned as far too painful.

However, he did enjoy watching Spock with Lucifer. It was obvious the boy was in awe of the kind, gentle Vulcan. Spock assumed no father image - he treated Lucifer as an equal and yet managed to relate to the 13 year old on his own level.





Their conversation today centered on the fact that it was Christmas Eve on Puerta del Diablo.

"Spock, look at what I bought for my mother." Lucifer eagerly extended a small, rectangular package.

The Vulcan was suitably impressed - and surprised - when he opened it to reveal a paper novel, an antique copy of a 21st Century Romance classic.

"This is...stunning. Where did you get it?"

Kirk came to join them, fascinated. Carefully, he took the book from Spock's hands, holding it with the true love of a collector.

Lucifer winked. "Oh, I know where to find things. This came from a shop across town. The owner doesn't know the value of what he has. Bargains are easy to find if you know what you're doing."

"It's beautiful," Kirk admired. "I'm sure your mother will be thrilled."

"I hope so. Right now she's angry with me for not doing my chores." Lucifer shrugged. "But I don't care - it's Christmas!"

Kirk checked his chronometer. "I...have an errand to run." He looked pointedly at Spock, unable to say more in front of the boy. It was 11:15; time for rendezvous.

Spock stood, reaching for his tattered boots. "I shall go," he offered.

"No - you stay here with Lucifer." Kirk stayed Spock's hand with a gentle touch. He hated it every time Spock had to put on those old, worn boots, every time the susceptible Vulcan had to go out in the cold. "I'll take care of it."

Spock hesitated, then acquiesced. "Very well. Do not tarry too damn long."

Shaking with silent laughter, Kirk left.



As soon as Kirk was out the door, Spock reached again for his boots. An excitement filled him.

"Lucifer - you must tell me exactly where this shop is located. Will you draw me a map?"

The boy hesitated. "It's far," he cautioned. "Do you plan to walk?"

"Indeed. Vulcan stamina excels Human standards. It shall not take me long." Anticipation made him eager.

"Why? Why are you going?"

"As you said earlier - it's Christmas!"





Another wasted stake-out. The cold air stung Kirk's cheeks as he trudged back home from the railroad yard.

Back in the populated area, he was very conscious of the holiday atmosphere. By taking a slight detour, he went through a small shopping district. He thought he might pick up some special treat for their evening meal - some nuts, perhaps, or a block of cheese.

If only he had some extra money, he could buy something really nice, make a suitable celebration for Spock and himself. But without knowing how long before Aquarius showed up, he couldn't afford to be frivolous. Their very limited cache of funds may have to last another week or more.

As he passed the decorated store windows, something caught his eye. He backtracked a few paces for a second look.

It was a small shop, nestled between two garish neighbors, a craftsman's emporium. *CUSTOM MADE*, the sign proclaimed. *LEATHERLIKE GOODS*. Below that, the words, *For Sale or Barter*. The window was filled with a wondrous array of backpacks, boots, belts, and card holders. It was the boots which drew his attention.

Curious, he went inside. He examined several items, impressed by their quality. An old man, seated behind the counter working on staining a belt, looked up when he entered, but otherwise left him alone.

With open admiration, Kirk watched him work. He displayed a genuine talent. Every now and then he would reach up and rub at his eyes, adjust the object closer or farther away. With a smile, Kirk recognized and empathized with the man's problem.

"Trouble seeing?" he commiserated.

The man shook his head ruefully. "Doctor says I can't tolerate Retinax. Makes me break out." He sighed. "It's getting harder and harder to do my work, though."

Kirk nodded. "Me, too." He reached into his pocket and plucked out the blue velvet case. True to his prediction, the glasses had been back in his jacket when they had come forward in time. McCoy had even managed to replace the broken lens while they had been in San Francisco at Starfleet Headquarters. Now, he extended the lenses to the shop owner. "Try these."

Just as Kirk himself had once done, the man looked at them without comprehension. "What are they?"

"Old fashioned eyeglasses to correct vision defects. Put them over your eyes," Kirk instructed.

"I've seen photographs of people with these," the man mused, slipping them on. He picked up his tools and resumed work, testing. After a few minutes, his face wore a wide smile. "These are wonderful!" He looked back at Kirk, up over the lenses. "Would you consider selling them?"

Kirk shook his head. "No. I need..." He hesitated, considering. "...boots. I need a pair of boots!" A rush of excitement filled him. Decent boots for Spock! Surely Bones would understand the importance of the trade.





"For yourself?" the shopowner was asking.

Kirk smiled. "On Christmas? No, these are a gift. Will you make a pair in exchange for the glasses?"

"With these," the man mused aloud, "I'll be able to finish all my commitments in half the time. My friend, you have yourself a deal!"

Delighted, Kirk gave him the size, selected color, finish and design, then stood back and watched the craftsman work his magic. Suddenly it felt like Christmas!



The dusty little antique store was exactly as Lucifer had promised - a veritable treasure chest of rare and unique items. Spock had seen more than a dozen things that Kirk would have prized, but he had come for a book, and it was a book which he ultimately found. He had seen Jim's face that morning when he had held Lucifer's novel. And memory of a much appreciated birthday gift reinforced his decision. Yes, it must be a book.

And what a find it was, too. The book was a 20th century English translation of the French classic, *Les Miserables*, by Victor Hugo. Lucifer had told him that the owner would barter, so, with no money, Spock approached him.

"What will you take for this book?" he questioned.

Hands busy doing six things, the shopowner barely paused. A cursory glance, a slight hesitation, then, "What do you offer?"

Spock considered. "You seem to need help. May I work for you?"

"My orders are backed up - everyone wants everything today because it's Christmas Eve, and my delivery boy went out of town for the holiday."

"I will make your deliveries." Spock did not hesitate. The labor would be worth it, he knew, to see Jim's face when he unwrapped the novel.

The thin young man extended a hand. "Agreed. We have a deal."

"Indeed." Spock took the hand in a firm clasp.



It started to snow as Kirk approached home. The fat, white flakes delighted him in his present mood of holiday cheer. It seemed fitting, somehow, on Christmas Eve, as if the planet had arranged their weather.

He rushed eagerly up the steps carrying the large box which contained his surprise and a small bag of consumables for a late night festivity. Like Santa Claus, he wanted to proclaim, 'Ho-ho-ho, Merry Christmas!' as he crossed the threshold, but his voice caught after the first syllable. The room was empty.



Disappointed, Kirk peered through the gathering gloom around the one large, windowless room. Everything was just as he had left it at noon and it was now after 5 o'clock. There was no sign of Spock or





Lucifer. Placing his packages on the countertop, Kirk considered where Spock might have gone.

Using the indoor stairs, he went down to the Okeefe residence. Perhaps Spock was there, or they would know something. But there was no answer; they were out. It was possible, he thought, that Spock might be with them.

Defeated, he trudged back upstairs. Knowing the Vulcan's penchant for worrying, he might have gone out to look for the late arriving Kirk.

Wherever he was, Kirk assumed he knew what he was doing and that he would soon be back. He began to unpack his purchases.



Gold clutched at the Vulcan as he emerged from the antique store. It had been snowing for the last hour, and with the lowering of the wan sun, the temperature had dropped another ten degrees.

He had made his last delivery and finally had been able to pick up his gift for Kirk and leave. But the afternoon had taken its toll from him. Outside almost the whole time, he had managed to block the pain of the cold and, later, damp weather, concentrating his mental and physical energies on the task at hand. Now, faced with yet another five mile walk home, he felt his strength begin to ebb.

Street lighting came on, glowing with a haze, filtered by the snow. Wearily, no longer able to feel his feet or hands, Spock mentally clocked off the distance covered. One mile... two... He was beginning to lose the ability to block the discomforts; his body betrayed his mind. People passing him began to look at him strangely, but he did not notice them, did not realize that he was faltering, weaving, stumbling. He felt so tired - if only he could lie down and rest.

Soon... soon he would be home and he would surprise Jim. He clutched his package tighter and kept walking.



The evening dragged on with agonizing slowness. Kirk paced the tiny room, frequently going to the door to look up and down the street. Still Spock did not appear, nor did anyone come home downstairs. It occurred to him, belatedly, that if Spock had gone somewhere with the Okeefes, he would most probably have left a note.

Once, about 9:00 p.m., Kirk went all the way down to the railroad yard and back, taking their customary route, hoping, perhaps, Spock had gone searching for him. He cursed himself for having stayed away all afternoon.

On the one hand, he chided himself for being so concerned. Spock wasn't a child and he was perfectly able to take care of himself. He knew, however, that the reborn Vulcan was prone to impulsiveness, to doing what Spock considered 'taking the most direct and obvious course,' which in Kirk's opinion led to some pretty bizarre behavior. Like jumping into a whale tank to perform a mind meld. Kirk had kept a cautious eye on him ever since that incident.





The other factor, the alternate hand, however, was more deeply rooted, more grim. Having lost Spock, having gone through the agony of his death, Kirk harbored a morbid fear of it happening again. The basic vulnerability of life was now ever-present. Just letting Spock out of sight for a protracted length of time was reason for a slight anxiety, a subtle nervousness that had never before been a part of their relationship. *'You left me once...will you leave me again?'* Constantly, Kirk fought against it getting in the way and mostly it didn't, but tonight he had a strange feeling, almost a premonition. He sensed that Spock was in trouble, in danger, that something had happened.

Eventually midnight drew close and reluctantly Kirk left for the rendezvous. Impatient, he waited only until 12:15, then rushed back to the rooming house, hoping against hope that the Vulcan would be home, a simple explanation in hand.

The room was as he had left it. Heart sinking, he slumped against the closed door.

Barely a minute passed, however, before a knock sounded on the inside door. Crossing the room, he opened it to reveal an agitated Lucifer Okeefe.

"Mister Jim - a man was just here looking for you. I'm so glad you're back!"

"Who - what man?" Kirk drew the boy into the room.

"He was from the hospital. He said Mr. Spock collapsed on the street and he's over there now. Mother and I had just arrived home, and-- "

Lucifer went on; Kirk heard no more. Something deep inside of him relaxed; even alarming news was better than no news. He realized he didn't even know where the hospital was located.

"It's not far," Lucifer assured, explaining how to get there. "He said not to worry, that Mr. Spock's okay, that he just got too cold."

Kirk paused only long enough to pick up the box with Spock's gift, although why he took it he couldn't say. It was, somehow, an unstated proclamation that everything would be all right, would be normal again. Thanking Lucifer, he hurried outside.



From his cocoon of warmth and security, Spock struggled to awareness. Someone was repeating his name and he perceived a psychic wave of human emotions which he struggled to define. Anxiety, worry, fear...gentle affection, tenderness, pleasure. The thought/emotion patterns could belong to only one individual.

"Jim..." He said the name even before he opened his eyes. Then, blinking several times, unfocused, he fought off the effect of the sedative he had been given and turned his head to meet a very familiar pair of hazel eyes.

"Easy... how do you feel?" Kirk's weight settled on the side of the bed. Using his elbows, Spock hoisted himself partially upright.

"The...physicians here are...even more overzealous than...McCoy." Spock grimaced as movement brought discomfort. "They...insisted I stay here...gave me a drug despite my...objections..."





A not altogether sympathetic smile touched Kirk's mouth. "You've never been a good patient, Spock. Just relax and let them do what's best for you. I was worried about you. What happened, anyway?"

"Prolonged exposure to the...elements caused...a severe reaction. It really is of small consequence, Jim. A minor discomfort."

"Why were you exposed to the elements?" Kirk queried.

"Ah!" Spock remembered all at once; as before, eagerness filled him, shaking off the last vestiges of the sedative. "Across the room - in that closet -- " he indicated where by gesture. "They placed my personal belongings there."

Kirk understood in part what Spock was not saying. "What do you need? I'll get it."

"A parcel. Covered in white paper..." Spock sat up all the way, leaned forward in anticipation as Kirk complied, retrieving the package and returning to his side. He held it out toward Spock.

"Here -- "

"No. It is yours." Now that the moment was here, Spock felt curiously ill at ease; it was an awkward moment. He wondered if he had been too presumptuous. "Merry Christmas, Jim."

Clearly touched, Kirk's expression conveyed his emotions. "Mine...?" he mouthed, confused. With a look which said that he couldn't quite believe what he heard, he tore off the white paper.

"Where did you get this? How...?" Appreciative, Kirk inspected his gift. The title page was printed boldly. "Les Miserables - I've never read this, either. But, wait..." A suspicious look crossed his face. "You had no money."

"You like it, then?" Spock purposely ignored the question.

"Very much. Thank you." As if taking the hint that Spock wanted no questions, he did not pursue the subject. Instead, he bent over and picked up a large box which had been sitting on the floor. "And Merry Christmas to you, too."

It was Spock's turn to be surprised. He remembered Kirk's absolute dismissal of the holiday the night before. He was *such* an unpredictable Human!

"I did not expect..."

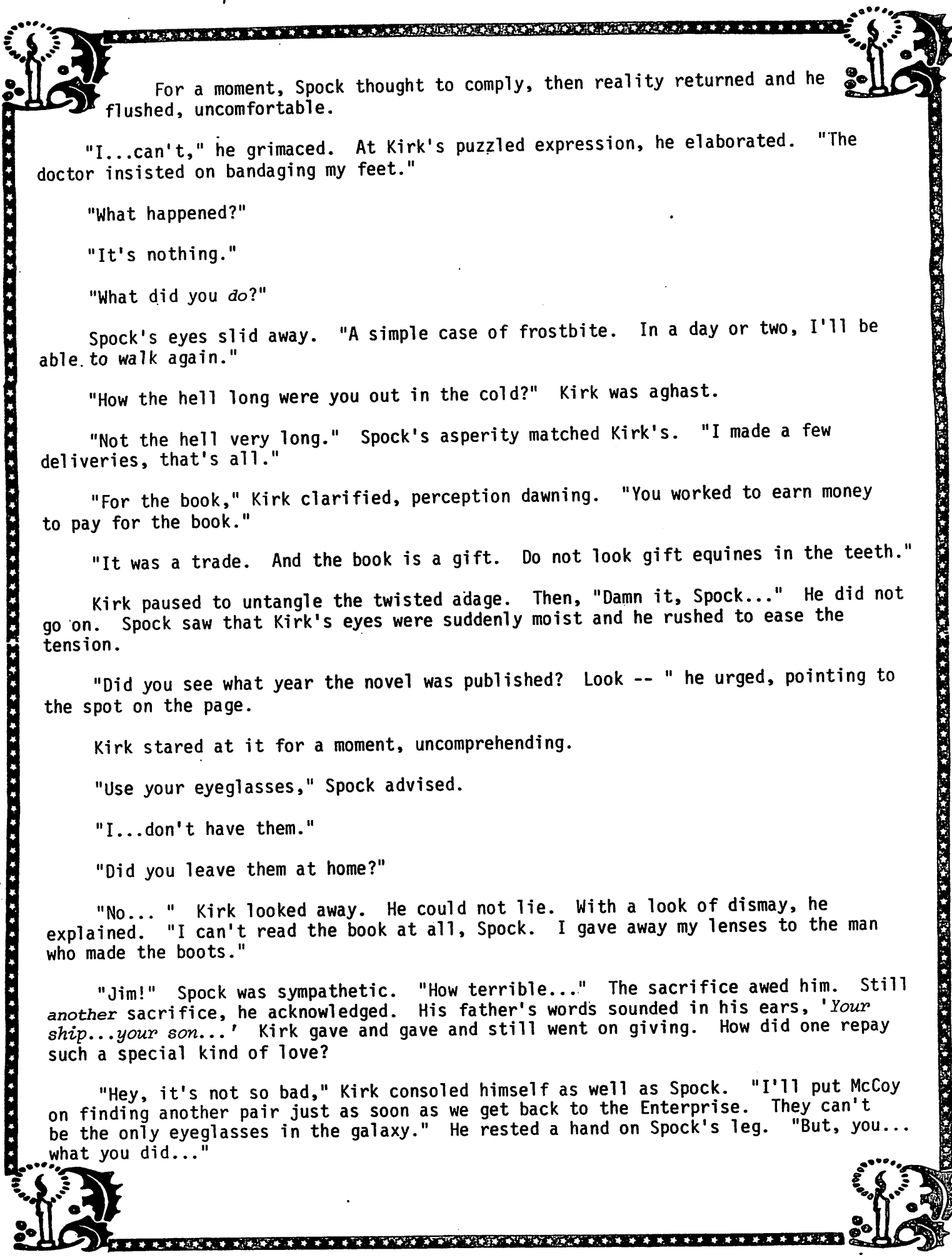
"Open it," Kirk urged, beaming as he awaited Spock's reaction.

There was no wrapping; Spock merely lifted the lid and pushed aside the tissue. Nestled inside were clearly the finest pair of boots Spock had ever seen. Excellently crafted, the supple material shone with a deep, dark brown patina.

"These are...beautiful. But how did you --"

"Try them on," Kirk urged.





For a moment, Spock thought to comply, then reality returned and he flushed, uncomfortable.

"I...can't," he grimaced. At Kirk's puzzled expression, he elaborated. "The doctor insisted on bandaging my feet."

"What happened?"

"It's nothing."

"What did you *do*?"

Spock's eyes slid away. "A simple case of frostbite. In a day or two, I'll be able to walk again."

"How the hell long were you out in the cold?" Kirk was aghast.

"Not the hell very long." Spock's asperity matched Kirk's. "I made a few deliveries, that's all."

"For the book," Kirk clarified, perception dawning. "You worked to earn money to pay for the book."

"It was a trade. And the book is a gift. Do not look gift equines in the teeth."

Kirk paused to untangle the twisted adage. Then, "Damn it, Spock..." He did not go on. Spock saw that Kirk's eyes were suddenly moist and he rushed to ease the tension.

"Did you see what year the novel was published? Look -- " he urged, pointing to the spot on the page.

Kirk stared at it for a moment, uncomprehending.

"Use your eyeglasses," Spock advised.

"I...don't have them."

"Did you leave them at home?"

"No..." Kirk looked away. He could not lie. With a look of dismay, he explained. "I can't read the book at all, Spock. I gave away my lenses to the man who made the boots."

"Jim!" Spock was sympathetic. "How terrible..." The sacrifice awed him. Still another sacrifice, he acknowledged. His father's words sounded in his ears, '*Your ship...your son...*' Kirk gave and gave and still went on giving. How did one repay such a special kind of love?

"Hey, it's not so bad," Kirk consoled himself as well as Spock. "I'll put McCoy on finding another pair just as soon as we get back to the Enterprise. They can't be the only eyeglasses in the galaxy." He rested a hand on Spock's leg. "But, you... what you did..."





"We seem to have a common failing." Brown eyes met graying hazel ones, holding in a look of mutual appreciation and affection.

"Yes," Kirk sighed. "This *has* been a crazy, mixed-up Christmas." He paused. "And a very *special* Christmas."

"I have a pair of boots I cannot wear, and you have a book you cannot read," Spock summarized.

"You will wear them in a few days," Kirk consoled.

A smile played around Spock's mouth. "And I see no reason why you must wait to read your novel. I can read aloud quite proficiently and, I've been told, with great...ah, feeling. If you'd like..." he added.

"Would you? Yes, I'd *like* immensely."

"Pull over a chair and get comfortable."

"Now?"

"What better way to spend Christmas day?" Spock replied.

"I can't think of one." Kirk adjusted the seat and leaned back. "Begin..."

As a cold dawn broke over the city, the circle of warmth drew closer around the two men in the hospital room. It was, indeed, a very special Christmas, an extra bonus thrown into their year, and one which they would never forget.



★ ★ ★ ★

...the silent stars go by

★ ★ ★

★

RENEWAL

by

Ginna LaCroix

"Your son meant more to me than you can know."

The cheerful fire crackled on the hearth,
Its warm glow accenting the tiny candles
Flickering among the branches of the pine tree,
The only one to be found on Vulcan,
Brought from Earth,
Brought by Sarek's love for his wife.
His eyes fell on his son.
Spock's dark head bowed over the chess board,
Pondering yet another insane move by the human,
The man who had spoken those words to Sarek,
And who had been willing to risk his life,
And his career,
For a love that rivalled Sarek's own.
Hazel eyes lifted and met his,
A slight smile acknowledging unspoken words.
Vulcans did not celebrate this season. . .
Humans did.
Yet Kirk had known how important it was
For Spock to be here -- whole and complete --
On this Christmas Day.
A renewal of life. . . and love,
For them all.



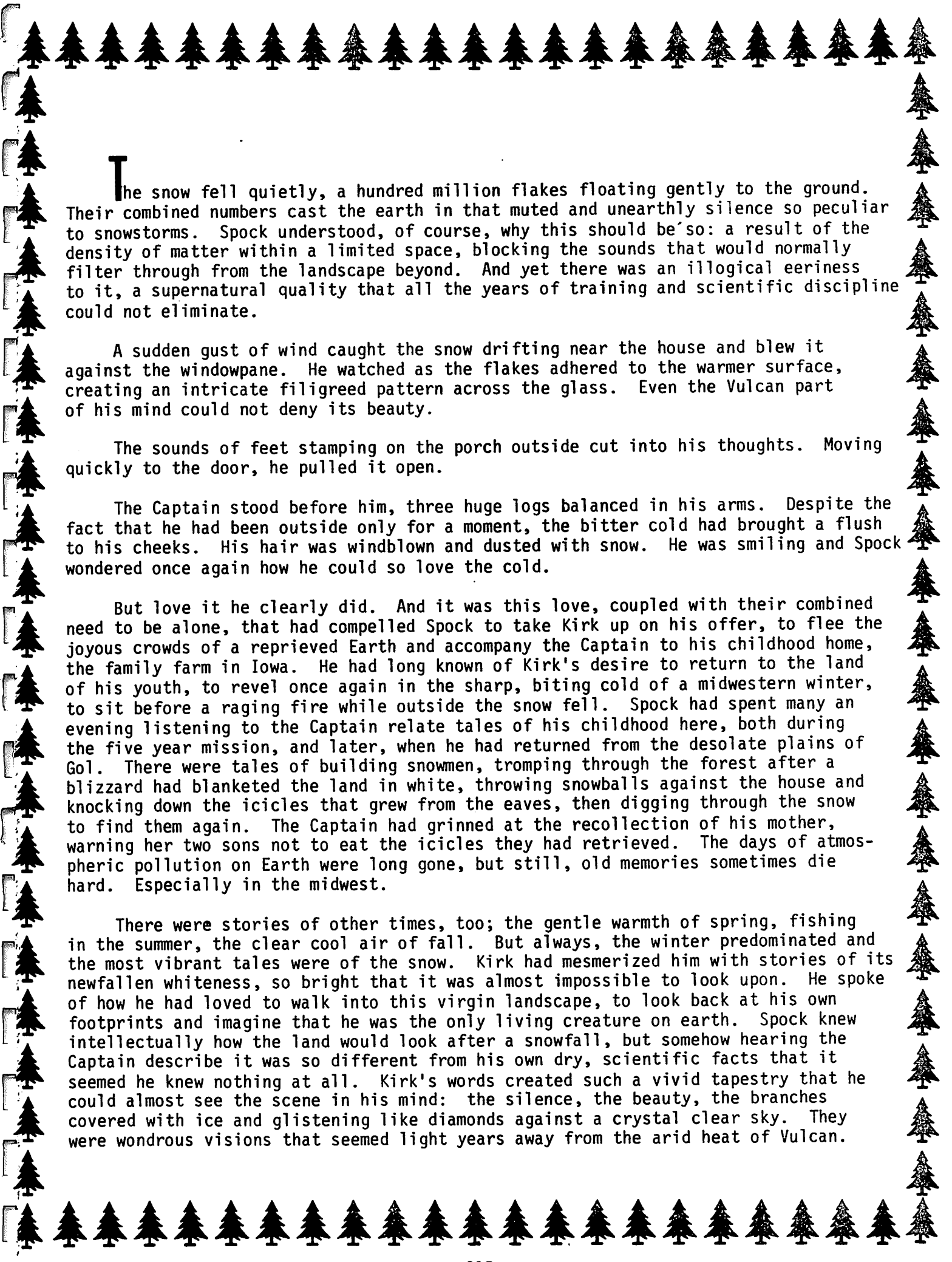
A Time to Receive



by Deborah Cummins

art by Andrea Kunz





The snow fell quietly, a hundred million flakes floating gently to the ground. Their combined numbers cast the earth in that muted and unearthly silence so peculiar to snowstorms. Spock understood, of course, why this should be so: a result of the density of matter within a limited space, blocking the sounds that would normally filter through from the landscape beyond. And yet there was an illogical eeriness to it, a supernatural quality that all the years of training and scientific discipline could not eliminate.

A sudden gust of wind caught the snow drifting near the house and blew it against the windowpane. He watched as the flakes adhered to the warmer surface, creating an intricate filigreed pattern across the glass. Even the Vulcan part of his mind could not deny its beauty.

The sounds of feet stamping on the porch outside cut into his thoughts. Moving quickly to the door, he pulled it open.

The Captain stood before him, three huge logs balanced in his arms. Despite the fact that he had been outside only for a moment, the bitter cold had brought a flush to his cheeks. His hair was windblown and dusted with snow. He was smiling and Spock wondered once again how he could so love the cold.

But love it he clearly did. And it was this love, coupled with their combined need to be alone, that had compelled Spock to take Kirk up on his offer, to flee the joyous crowds of a reprieved Earth and accompany the Captain to his childhood home, the family farm in Iowa. He had long known of Kirk's desire to return to the land of his youth, to revel once again in the sharp, biting cold of a midwestern winter, to sit before a raging fire while outside the snow fell. Spock had spent many an evening listening to the Captain relate tales of his childhood here, both during the five year mission, and later, when he had returned from the desolate plains of Gol. There were tales of building snowmen, tromping through the forest after a blizzard had blanketed the land in white, throwing snowballs against the house and knocking down the icicles that grew from the eaves, then digging through the snow to find them again. The Captain had grinned at the recollection of his mother, warning her two sons not to eat the icicles they had retrieved. The days of atmospheric pollution on Earth were long gone, but still, old memories sometimes die hard. Especially in the midwest.

There were stories of other times, too; the gentle warmth of spring, fishing in the summer, the clear cool air of fall. But always, the winter predominated and the most vibrant tales were of the snow. Kirk had mesmerized him with stories of its newfallen whiteness, so bright that it was almost impossible to look upon. He spoke of how he had loved to walk into this virgin landscape, to look back at his own footprints and imagine that he was the only living creature on earth. Spock knew intellectually how the land would look after a snowfall, but somehow hearing the Captain describe it was so different from his own dry, scientific facts that it seemed he knew nothing at all. Kirk's words created such a vivid tapestry that he could almost see the scene in his mind: the silence, the beauty, the branches covered with ice and glistening like diamonds against a crystal clear sky. They were wondrous visions that seemed light years away from the arid heat of Vulcan.

He remembered how a part of him had always yearned to come to this place and see the slice of Kirk's life that he had never shared. He recalled that often he felt a strange sort of jealousy at the thought of all those years that the Captain had lived without him. It was as if he *should* have been there, as if the two of them belonged together from the first day of their lives until the last.

He glanced up to see Kirk regarding him quizzically, the logs tilting somewhat precariously to the side. Reaching out, he steadied them with one hand. "Here, I will help you."

Kirk smiled again. "No, thanks. Just move aside, if you would. That way, we won't have a snowdrift in the hallway."

Spock turned back to see the snow continue to blow in through the open doorway. Hastily, he stepped back to allow Kirk to pass. The Captain moved quickly to the hearth and dropped the logs onto the flagstones before him. He spent a moment stacking them into a chaotic pile, 'guaranteed,' he had told Spock earlier, 'to start a fire in thirty seconds.' Spock used the opportunity to try to push back the snow onto the porch with the side of his boot. More snow came in than went out. Some flew into his eyes. He blinked and shut the door.

Carefully placing a magnesite tablet below the bottom log, Kirk hit it sharply with a piece of kindling. A dazzling white flame erupted immediately, engulfing the logs and, as predicted, the fire was well under way thirty seconds later.

The Captain straightened up and moved back to his side. Spock turned toward the kitchen, embarrassed by his illogical approach to snow removal. "I apologize for allowing the snow to come in. I will get a broom..."

Kirk touched him lightly on the arm. "Do you know how many times snow has gotten into this hallway?"

Spock hesitated, trying to calculate a reasonable figure. The Captain, seeing his expression, laughed. "I meant that rhetorically, my friend. Don't worry about it. The wood's been treated; it's waterproof. The snow won't do any harm. Come on." He inclined his head toward the hearth. "This is the best fire I've made all day. Let's not let it go to waste."

Spock repressed a smile. Kirk did not. "I know, I know. It's the *only* fire I've made all day. But," his eyes narrowed as he scanned the Vulcan's pale face, "you've been in the house for fifteen minutes and you still look cold. I knew you shouldn't have been outside for so long." Taking one of Spock's hands within his own, he rubbed the skin vigorously. "Damn it, Spock. Your hands are like ice."

"Hardly. The surface temperature of ice is zero degrees celsius."

The dry comment dispelled much of the concern in Kirk's eyes. The persistent massage slowed, then stopped. The Captain, however, did not release him, but continued to hold his hand in a tight grip. "You know something?" he said softly. "I'm glad that you came here with me. I haven't spent a Christmas in this house in nearly thirty-five years. I really wanted you to come, but," he smiled faintly, "I wasn't sure if I should ask you. I figured that you'd come if I invited you and I know how sensitive you are to the cold."

Spock regarded him silently. He would have followed the Captain to Antarctica if that had been his wish.

"Anyway," Kirk released his hand, "I'm glad you accepted my invitation to come to see the old homestead. And I must say, you build the most technical snowman I've ever seen."

His face lit up at the recollection and Spock understood the reason. Surely the sight of him buried in the scarf, coat, hat and gloves that the Captain insisted upon, methodically constructing his figure with single-minded purpose must have been an amusing one. The effort had taken most of the afternoon, but, with a rare display of Vulcan stubbornness, he had refused outright to come into the house until it was completed. The fact that the finished creation looked nothing like a classic snowman the Captain had the good grace to keep to himself.

"Come on," Kirk repeated, tugging his arm. "Let's go get you warmed up. McCoy will never forgive me if I let you catch pneumonia."

Kirk moved ahead of him and sat down, his body so near the fire that Spock clearly saw him flinch as the heat assaulted his skin. "Jim, it is not necessary to sit in the fireplace."

The Captain pressed his lips together, fighting off the urge to laugh. "I used to stretch out here all the time when I was a kid. The warmth feels nice, reminds me of the good old days." He patted the floor beside him. "Come on -- sit beside me."

Spock lowered himself against the timeworn flagstones. The heat hit him like a gust of wind from a blast furnace. Glancing to one side, he saw a thin sheen of perspiration already forming on the Captain's brow. Reaching up, he brushed it away. "I am no longer cold."

"Good." Kirk did not show any indication that he planned to move.

Spock sighed. Rising to his feet, he walked to a nearby chair and sat down, aware that the Captain had turned around to watch him. A faint smile played across his lips as he nodded toward the chair beside his own. "You will be far more comfortable if you sit over here, Jim."

Kirk shook his head in resignation. His cheeks were flushed from the heat, his eyes warm with affection. Silently, he stood and, walking to Spock's side, sat in the empty chair.

"You needn't be so solicitous of my welfare. I assure you that I will not break."

Kirk gave him a look of feigned indignation. "I never thought you would, Mr. Spock."

Their gazes met and held for a moment. Both men knew how diligently the Captain had kept Spock under careful, albeit subtle observation ever since the Refusion, as if fearful that the Vulcan might disappear if he looked away for a moment. Even here, three weeks after the Federation hearing, he deferred Spock's request to help with the strenuous work, insisting on shoveling the steps by himself, carrying the logs in from their storage area below the porch without help.

But, looking into the hazel eyes, Spock understood. Indeed, he knew that, if the situation had been reversed, his own over-protectiveness would have probably driven the Captain mad by this time.

Kirk settled back in his chair as the silence stretched out between them. Save for the sounds of the fireplace and an occasional gust of wind, the world was completely quiet. Warm and restful. Spock let his arms dangle over the arms of the chair in a most non-Vulcan way. He hadn't felt so at peace with himself in a very long time.

The Captain yawned. "Are you hungry?"

Spock was not even faintly in need of sustenance, but he had sensed Kirk's appetite the instant the Captain had touched his hand a few moments before. "Yes."

Kirk glanced over and gave him a very discerning look. "Well, so much for the myth that Vulcans never lie." Resting his head on the back of the chair, he arched his back. "It's nice to be alone for a change," he whispered. "It's been a rough two weeks."

To that, Spock was forced to agree. A rough two weeks indeed. The Captain, he knew, had hoped to avoid the fuss and fanfare that should have followed the successful conclusion of their mission. The probe was gone now, returning, no doubt, to the mysterious planet that had sent it. The whales and their new offspring were frolicking in a predator-free ocean under the watchful attention of a hundred scientists. The sky was clear, the sun shining, the land dry once again.

And the crew of the new Starship Enterprise had beat a hasty retreat the moment the Federation hearings had ended, hoping to defer by their very absence the honors and ceremony that would almost inevitably be forthcoming.

It was a false hope; the Human need to express gratitude would not be denied. The call had come, summoning them back to earth to receive their accolades, endure their parades, participate in countless banquets and dinners. The Captain, never one to put a high value on such things, had protested the Starfleet order to no avail. The crisis over, he would have preferred to put the entire matter behind him and concentrate on running his ship. As would they all.

However, one could not expect to rescue an entire planet from oblivion and quietly escape. The Federation Council and half the planets in the alliance were determined to honor the Captain and his crew for their heroic deeds.

So they had endured endless parties and celebrations where they were showered with honors and long speeches, living in the public eye for nearly two weeks. Spock had often noticed Kirk's gaze on him as they were shouted at, jostled and generally fawned over by representatives of several dozen planetary governments. Unlike the Captain, who could move through a crowd with complete social grace and ease, Spock had found the continual scrutiny unnerving. It was difficult for him to create the appearance that he was enjoying himself when he was, in fact, miserable and, by the twelfth day, his endurance was wearing perilously thin.

But he was, after all, a Vulcan and very little of his discomfort showed on the surface. No one except the Captain sensed it. But Kirk felt it as clearly as if he had spoken of it aloud, and, at the first opportunity, had brought up the

suggestion of returning to visit his home in Iowa. He had known that Spock needed to be alone, needed time away from the prying eyes that surrounded them. There was a break in the round of ceremonies due to the upcoming holidays and Kirk was determined to take advantage of it.

'Come on, Spock,' he had said. 'It'll be Christmas in six days and I haven't been back to the old house in nearly ten years. Everyone else is going home. McCoy is off to Georgia to visit his daughter, Chekov and Sulu are in to Kyoto, Uhura and Scotty are seeing the sights of Edinborough. It'll be quiet and peaceful. No one around for miles. What do you say?'

Spock, of course, had said yes. He had come to Iowa, although the destination was irrelevant. He had never willingly rejected an offer to be with the Captain and he was not about to start now.

The house, somewhat to his surprise, was exactly as he had pictured it to be. Square and sturdy, it was hewn of redwood, cut in the long ago days of the great western forests, then covered with cedar shake. It was traditionally white, with a large black door. A wrap-around porch and sharply peaked roof bespoke of the short, hot summers and the heavy snows of winter. The house was in the middle of a great field with elms and chestnuts planted beside it for shade. It stood alone, unmovable, almost defiant. In many ways, it was much like the Captain.

A log in the fireplace shifted position, sending a shower of sparks into the air and nudging Spock gently from his thoughts. He glanced up to find Kirk looking at him.

"I love this house," the Captain said softly, as if he'd been reading Spock's mind. "I can remember when my father would build a fire every night in the winter and we'd sit right here and play cards. We had a rickety old table and we'd put it between these chairs and play for hours. Sam wasn't very good at cards. He usually lost, although sometimes I deliberately let him win." He cast an oblique look to one side. "You've done that sometimes, haven't you? Let me win at chess."

Spock assumed a suitably affronted expression, but one lie a day was his limit and he made no answer.

Kirk chuckled. "Just as I thought," he whispered before picking up the conversation as if there had been no interruption. "Anyhow, we'd play cards and drink chocolate. My mom would make these biscuits out of cinnamon and sugar. Boy, I ate those things by the ton. They'd melt in your mouth. She would bring them out and we'd polish off a dozen at a time. Then, at Christmas, she'd make cookies, Santa Claus, snowmen, reindeer, all the old traditional shapes. My mother was cut from the typical midwestern mold, you understand. She preferred an old-fashioned Christmas." He smiled gently. "I remember once, though, my dad brought home a spiked torquinia from the crystal caves of Io. It was beautiful. I can recall it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. Glowing with that inner light, purple and red. It lit the place up as much as the Christmas tree." He glanced to one side. "Have you ever seen one?"

Spock nodded, but, not wishing to disturb the Captain's reverie, made no verbal comment.

Kirk turned back to stare into the fire. "The traders brought them back a hundred years earlier and, within a decade, they were as much a part of Christmas as

Santa Claus." He laughed. "My mom put ours square in the center of the mantle. I'd swear that, if I closed my eyes, I could still see it up there."

His expression grew wistful as his mind began to play back a thousand different memories. Watching him, Spock felt a very familiar ache grow within his chest. He knew of Christmas, of course. His mother had told him about it and he had always sensed her sorrow at having to leave the holiday behind her. Sarek had not objected to her celebrating the event, but had made his opinions obvious in a hundred more subtle ways, and Amanda had agreed. Somehow, Christmas had seemed hopelessly out of place on a planet of logic and restraint.

The Captain turned back to look at him. "Do you know what we used to do? Put out cookies and milk on the mantle for Santa Claus. And hay -- we'd put an armful of hay on the doorstep outside for the reindeer. I remember when I was very small, I used to think of how hungry those reindeer must have been, lugging that sleigh across the entire planet in only one night." He smiled at his own innocence. "My parents were always careful to throw it all away after we went to bed. I caught them at it once, but they didn't see me." He stared into the fireplace once again. "I never did tell them about that."

Spock could sense the memories winding through the Captain's mind, could almost see the little boy peering down from the stairway in wide-eyed fascination. And he found himself wondering what it would have been like if, instead of one five year old child on that landing so many years ago, there had been two.

A hidden air pocket within one of the logs suddenly exploded, throwing a flaming chunk onto the rug. Kirk leaned forward and slapped it out, brushing his hands against his pants to wipe off the soot. Settling back into his chair, he looked over at Spock. "After dinner, what do you say we set up the Christmas tree?"

One eyebrow rose. "Must a tree be sacrificed to do this?"

Kirk's eyes narrowed, his expression a cross between puzzlement and dismay. The day before he had shown Spock the small stand of conifers beside the house, planted years ago for the express purpose of Christmas harvesting. He had taken great pains to point out that the trees had been seeded by man and were not naturally occurring. 'Just like pulling up a carrot for dinner,' he had commented lightly, casting a casual glance to one side. Spock had examined the tiny stand for a moment before nodding his head in silent approval. The Captain's relief was obvious.

But now, he was clearly uncertain if he had misunderstood Spock's views on the matter or if the Vulcan were simply teasing him. Spock's eyes danced with amusement, but he said nothing. It was, to use a Human colloquialism, a fait accompli. He had heard the chopping early this morning. The tree, he knew, stood propped against the back door at this very moment.

The Captain's expression darkened. "Sometimes," he said slowly, "I honestly don't know if you're joking or not. You're really very good at that Vulcan facade of yours."

"I have had a great deal of practice."

Kirk brightened at the lightness of his tone. "I take that to mean you have no strong moral objections to my 'sacrificing' a tree."

"No. Providing that you eat it afterward."

The words, spoken with such seriousness and intensity, were too much. The Captain broke into gales of laughter, the sound high-pitched and almost childlike. Spock's stolid and emotionless expression did not change and Kirk's composure disintegrated. He wrapped his arms around his stomach. *A peculiar Human quality*, Spock thought. *To lose oneself in laughter like this. Interesting.*

Kirk slowly regained control. Wiping his eyes with the back of one hand, he sniffed. "That was a good one, Spock. You're very good at that, too."

"What?"

"Seemingly unintentional humor. I just wish you'd show it to someone other than me. McCoy'd love it."

Spock smiled gently. "The joke was his idea, Captain."



The tree tilted precariously to one side. Spock caught one of the lower branches and tried to straighten it. "Jim, you are making it worse."

The needles brushing against the floor moved and he could barely make out Kirk's face. "I can't see what I'm doing. Damned tree's too dense on the bottom. It's blinding me."

"Increase your pressure on the northwest screw by eighteen percent."

Even through the branches, he could see the Captain stare at him in amazement. "The *northwest screw*. How am I supposed to see direction down here? Just tell me in the vernacular, would you please."

Spock sighed. Kirk was irritated, the result of being poked in the face a half dozen times by pine needles. "Turn the screw to your right four and one-half times."

He heard Kirk mutter something unintelligible. The tree slowly began righting itself. "How's that?"

"The angle is still at a variance of 4.3%."

Kirk pulled himself out from under the tree. There were so many needles sticking to his shirt that he looked like a porcupine. "Four point three percent. Well, I don't know about you, but I can live with that." He smiled. Reaching behind him, he began digging the foliage from his back.

Spock moved to his side and started to pull out the needles one at a time. "What do we do now, Captain?"

"Now we get the box from the attic and cover the tree with ornaments."

"Jim, you just spent two hours rearranging the limbs so that the tree would be perfectly symmetrical. If you, as you put it, 'cover it in ornaments,' that will weigh down the branches and upset the balance."

"That's all right. I don't care."

Spock gave him a totally befuddled look. "Then why rebuild the tree?"

Kirk shrugged. "My dad always did. I don't know. For fun, I guess."

Spock regarded him silently. The whispered oaths, the stabbed face and hands, the shirt that tore when a hidden branch sliced it open, hardly seemed like an enjoyable experience to him.

Kirk moved into the other room and pulled a huge, dog-eared box into the living room. The words 'Christmas Decorations' were written across the side in large red letters. The box was not much smaller than the tree. The Captain's promise to 'cover it' in ornaments was clearly no idle threat.

Reaching inside, Kirk pulled out what appeared to be a wad of paper. Unwrapping it with reverential care, he held out a small glass ball. "Do you know what this is?"

"No, Jim."

"A Christmas ball that my dad gave to my mom on their first wedding anniversary. See this." Holding the priceless heirloom in the palm of one hand, the Captain brought it over and held it out. "The paint's a bit worn now, but you can still make out a picture of the village. Armagh is its name. The Kirk family is supposed to have come from there -- Armagh, Ireland. My parents had planned to take a trip to Ireland when I was eight, but then my father was called away. He was killed a week later. My mother would never go after that. I tried to get her to, offered to pay her way, go with her, anything, but she wouldn't even discuss it."

He turned and walked quickly to the tree. Stretching his arm up, he hung the ball from the uppermost branch. "There. Put it up high where it won't get knocked down and broken."

He glanced back and gave Spock a wan smile. The sadness that suddenly pervaded his mood was almost tangible. "Sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to put a damper on the mood."

"It is all right." Spock had long ago come to recognize the Human tendency to mix pleasant memories with sad ones, to experience a sense of sorrow even in the midst of a fond recollection. He had sensed it often in his mother; the realization that the memory was over now, the people within it gone, never to return. It was an understandable reaction.

He inclined his head toward the box. "May I be of assistance?"

Kirk's eyes filled with affection. He recognized the Vulcan's somewhat obvious attempt to change the subject. "Of course, old friend. That's the whole idea."

Crossing the room, he knelt beside the box and began littering the floor with old pieces of paper similar to the one he had opened a moment before. "Careful, some of these things are breakable," he warned as Spock moved to kneel at his side. The paper wrappings, freed from the confines of the box, began to unwind and he could see some of the ornaments within them. There were, indeed, breakables here; glass balls made before the discovery of salinium. The thick, heavy products of

sodium, calcium oxide and sand, they stood out in marked contrast to their smoother, lighter counterparts of the current century. The addition of salinium had ended the need for high temperatures in the manufacture of glass but, still, there was a loss of aesthetic appeal in the newer ones that Spock could not deny.

A crystalline figure with an oriental face peeked out from behind a shred of paper. Another, of distinctly outworlder appearance, rested beside it. Spock studied the unfamiliar visage for a moment, uncertain if it were a stylized representation of an alien species or simply a figure from a Terran fairy tale.

He felt the touch against his arm and looked up. Kirk held out something to him, but at first he couldn't tell what it was.

"Hold it," the Captain said.

His eyes widened the moment the rock touched his skin. Activated by the warmth of Kirk's body and then his own, it began to throb with an inner fire as the chemical chains reorganized into new patterns. The rock's surface started to shift, bulging and stretching, almost as if there were a living creature inside trying to break free.

"Always reminded me of a child in its mother's womb," Kirk whispered.

Spock nodded. He recognized the stone now, although he had never seen one before.

"An acanthus," Kirk said, partly to himself. "Comes from the Persiad system. Legend says that the Son of God walked among the people there and, before he vanished, he gave life to the acanthus stone as a sign of remembrance." The Captain's expression grew distant. "Not many of them around these days. The planet, of course, was destroyed in the Earth and Romulan War..."

A look of great sorrow abruptly filled Kirk's eyes. After a moment, he focused on his somber-faced First Officer and forced a smile across his face. "I did it again, didn't I?"

Kirk clearly expected no answer and Spock gave none. Turning back to the box, he began once again to unload its contents onto the rug. Spock carefully laid the acanthus to one side.

Minutes passed. The ornaments continued to spread out in an ever-widening circle. Judging from the size of the box, Spock estimated that there must be well over one hundred.

Kirk seemed to sense his thoughts. "We used to save everything. Irish trait, I guess. Packrats, the bunch of us. Here, look at this!" His eyes brightened as he unfolded a smudged piece of newspaper and handed Spock what looked like a flattened and torn piece of finely pressed aluminum. "There's a cardboard tube inside, covered with aluminum foil. That stuff's been around forever. I made it when I was in the first grade. Glued on the eyes, nose and mouth. It was supposed to be an elf, I think."

Spock stared at the formless object, trying to project an elf there. Kirk smiled. "My mother couldn't see the elf either. But she loved it just the same. Wouldn't throw it out. I remember when I was a teenager, it embarrassed me. She'd stick it on the top of the tree where everyone could see it and some of my friends, boy, would they tease me about that." He laughed.

A flash of red caught Spock's attention. "What is this?"

Kirk pulled it out. "Don't you recognize this? It's tinsel. We put it on the tree we set up on the Enterprise." The Captain stretched out something that bore almost no resemblance to the thick metallic strands Spock had seen before. The string holding the decoration together was clearly visible due to the fact that 75% of the tinsel had fallen victim to the years.

Kirk smiled at his expression. "I guess it *is* a bit sparse. But, like I said, we never throw anything away."

"Indeed."

Standing up, Kirk pulled the strand from the box. Three feet, four feet. Five. The ornament kept coming, shedding most of the remaining tinsel as it moved.

Spock decided that supporessing a smile no longer had much purpose as he watched the metallic slivers rain onto the rug. The Captain stopped moving and stood silently, holding the now-barren strand in his hand. "I don't see anything particularly amusing. I'll have you know that this tinsel has been in our family for *decades*."

Spock assumed a suitably sympathetic air. Picking up the other end, he carried it across the room. "I understand the importance of such things, Captain. I did not intend to appear insensitive."

Kirk hesitated for a moment and gave him a strange look. He seemed on the verge of saying something, then apparently changed his mind and, turning back to face the tree, draped the ancient keepsake across its branches.



The lower branches lay flat against the floor. There were so many decorations covering the tree that it was almost completely hidden beneath them. Brightly colored lights flashed at irregular intervals, glowing with every color of the rainbow. Kirk stood back and gave it all an appraising eye. "That looks okay." He rubbed the fingers of one hand against his chin, his expression one of total concentration. Then he crossed the room and moved a single ball from one branch to another. To Spock, the effect was the same, but the Captain obviously thought differently. He glanced up at his somewhat bemused First Officer and grinned. "Done."

Gathering up the reams of crumpled paper in one huge armful, he shoved it back into the box. Needles littered the floor, the scent of pine was heavy in the air. The fire had died down and now glowed a cherry red on the bottom of the hearth.

The Captain straightened up, pushing the box into a far corner. He glanced toward the window. "It's stopped snowing."

Spock followed his gaze, although his sensitive hearing had told him precisely when the snowfall had ceased fifteen minutes earlier.

The sky was clear, the night totally silent. Ten million stars glittered vibrantly in the blackness, stretching through the dark from one horizon to the

next. Kirk was, as always, drawn to the sight of the stars. He moved to the window and stared out into the silence for a moment, his mind suddenly far away. Reaching up, he touched the glass with his fingers. "On warm nights," he said softly, "I'd lie outside in the grass, on the other side of that elm there, and stare at the sky for hours. The stars were so beautiful. They seemed to call out to me with their beauty, coaxing, daring me to see what they were really like."

The words trailed off. The memory seemed to bring a strange melancholy with it, a sadness far more intense than the one Kirk had experienced earlier in the evening. Spock moved to stand at his side.

Kirk looked over at him. "The stars have always brought me peace, Spock. On the return to Earth... when I thought I'd lost you, I went to the Observation Deck to watch the stars. Night after night, I'd go, trying to find some solace there. But it didn't work. The stars weren't beautiful anymore."

Turning around, he faced Spock directly. "Sometimes I can hardly believe that you're really here."

Spock understood. The thought of losing the Captain had haunted him for years. It was one of the primary reasons that he had fled to Gol. He realized that had the situation been reversed and he had seen the Captain die only to be reborn before his eyes, the psychological trauma would have been devastating. Kirk's bittersweet mood was mild in comparison. But then the Captain always had been better at dealing with emotional turmoil than he.

"Christmas," Kirk murmured. "It's always been a time for giving." He looked up at Spock and there were tears in his eyes. "But this year, I feel that I've received the greatest gift of all." He smiled faintly. "You."

"Jim... I..." Spock struggled to find the right thing to say. As so often in his life, however, the words that flashed through his mind were woefully, hopelessly inadequate.

For he understood, even if the words eluded him, exactly what the Captain meant. The terrible, all-consuming grief at his death had threatened to tear Kirk's very soul apart. And with that grief came something else just as devastating. The emptiness, the new emptiness in his life, like a gaping hole torn through the center of his soul. It was a loneliness that the passage of time would not alleviate, one that the Captain knew would stay with him until the last moment of his life and perhaps beyond.

Loneliness -- a concept with which Spock was very familiar. The word, as always, made him think of the lost years when he had run away from his own feelings. He had tried to burn them away on the desolate plains of Gol, transplanting one emotion for another -- pain for affection, loneliness for companionship, flaggellating himself for what he perceived as a fatal defect within his personality. Yet he was deluding himself. He loved Kirk. He knew it then and he knew it now. All of the privations on Vulcan would not change that fact.

He shook his head. It still saddened him that he had abandoned the Captain on that day so many years ago. *How could someone who purports to be so intelligent have made such a dreadful mistake?* he thought to himself. Even from the beginning, Kirk had known the decision was wrong, a Human need to flee from the feelings he

could not accept. He had sent Spock many messages that kept coming even as the ones preceeding them were returned unread. He had never given up.

And, despite the overwhelming odds, Kirk was, once again, correct. They had found each other and later, when death seemed to come between them, they had triumphed over that as well. They were here and they were together. It did seem, truly, to be a miracle.

He felt a familiar touch on his arm and realized that his mind had wandered. His mouth softened into a near smile. "I was thinking about Gol, Jim."

A strange look came into Kirk's eyes at the words. Reaching into his breast pocket, he pulled out a small box. "I know it's a few minutes early, but..." He held it out toward Spock. "Merry Christmas."

The box was small and wrapped in bright red paper. A large silver ribbon was attached to the top, the folds creased and flattened. "Here, take it."

Spock hesitated. "I have a gift for you, but it is upstairs. Let me get it first."

"No, no. Forget my present for now. Open yours."

Spock took the box from the Captain's hand. It was strangely heavy for its size. The sight of the crumpled ribbons touched his heart in a way he couldn't really explain. Clearly, Kirk had been carrying it for a long time.

Carefully, he pulled apart the ribbons and opened the box. Inside, lying on a bed of scarlet velvet, was a silver IDIC on a fine chain. He stared at it in stunned silence for a moment. The symbol had always reminded him of the Enterprise, of his life there in the midst of so many Humans -- the many receptions when he had worn it and stood stiffly at the Captain's side, McCoy's gentle badgering, the crises and triumphs, the chess games that lasted so far into the night. When he had fled for the emotionless peace of Gol, he had taken the priceless memento with him. But the sight of it brought too much pain. It had been one of the first of his possessions to go.

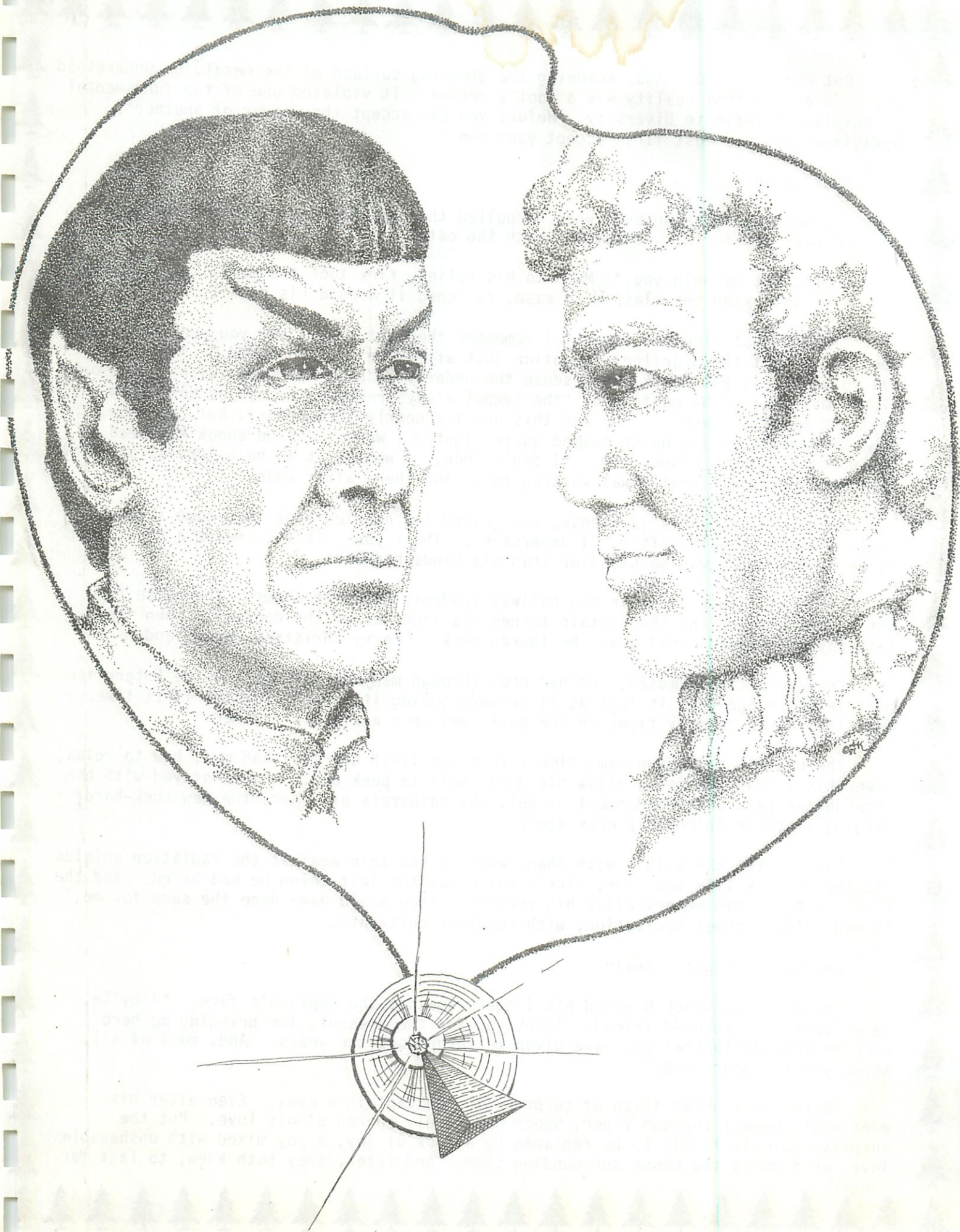
"It's just like the one you used to have, remember?"

Mutely, Spock nodded. He remembered.

The Captain moved a step closer to him. "I figured that you gave it away when you went to Gol. I know that possessions were frowned upon there."

Spock glanced up to see Kirk's wry smile. "I did some research after I found out where you had gone," he said softly. "Had to call up a few favors to do it. Gol's not the most written up place in the galaxy."

No doubt. Spock looked back at the shining IDIC. It was, indeed, just like the one he used to have. Most of his former possessions had been replaced in the years since his return to the Enterprise; the firepot, a communal gift from the crew one Christmas, his Vulcan lyre on another, even the woven blanket that draped across the foot of his bed during that five year mission so long ago.



But not the IDIC. And, scanning the gleaming surface of the metal, he understood why. To escape from reality was a fool's errand. It violated one of the fundamental principles of Infinite Diversity. Before you can accept the wonder of another's individuality, you must first accept your own.

"Put it on."

His hand was shaking and, when he pulled the necklace from its box, the metal bounced back and forth. He fumbled with the catch.

"Here, let me help you." Much to his relief, Kirk took the medallion from his hand and, unlocking the clasp with ease, fastened it around his neck.

"There, just like old times. I remember the last time I saw you wear the other one. It was at the Starfleet reception just after the mission ended." Kirk kept his voice level, but Spock could sense the underlying pain that came with the memory. "For some reason," he continued, "the symbol always reminded me of you more than anything else you owned. I've had this one for nearly three years, but, somehow, the time to give it to you never seemed quite right. I was..." He shook his head as the words he sought eluded him. "I don't know. I wanted it to be a special occasion. I'm not sure myself what I was waiting for. And then, after Khan..."

Spock could see his jaw tense, recognized the haunted look that came into his eyes. "Jim," he said softly, "I understand. Thank you. This... means a great deal to me." His voice was no steadier than his hands had been.

The grandfather clock in the hallway suddenly began to chime. The noise rang out in the silence and the Captain turned his face toward the doorway. When the last rhythmic sound faded away, he looked back. "Merry Christmas, my friend."

Christmas, Spock mused. He had been through many Christmases on the Enterprise but, in a strange way, it felt as if he were seeing it tonight for the first time. And Kirk, as in so many times in the past, was once again his teacher.

The Captain had shown him, almost from the first day they had met, how to relax, lower his Vulcan barriers, allow his Human half to peek out. He had stayed with him through the pain and abandonment of Gol, the catharsis of V'ger, the new rock-hard forging of their friendship once again.

Then, after the battle with Khan, when he had lain against the radiation shields and thought his life was over, Kirk's voice was the last thing he had heard. And the first to touch his memory after his rebirth. 'You would have done the same for me,' he had said, without hesitation, with complete certainty.

And he was right. Again.

Reaching up, Spock brushed his fingers against the Captain's face. "T'hy'la," he whispered. "Beloved friend. Thank you for the present, for bringing me here. For the friendship that you have given me throughout the years. And, most of all, thank you for your love."

There was a brief flash of surprise in the Captain's eyes. Even after his emotional renewal through V'ger, Spock had rarely spoken of his love. But the surprise quickly faded, to be replaced by a look of joy, a joy mixed with unshakable love, as firm as the house surrounding them. And fated, they both knew, to last far longer.

Christmas. The word came back into his mind. And he saw it clearly once again, what it was about the holiday that held such meaning for Humans. Not gift-giving and revelry, but love, companionship, giving, receiving, a hundred other things all mingled together. After a time, it becomes like a circle with no beginning and no end. Just as they had come full circle. In a way, they were back to where they were twenty years before. With one very important exception, for now Spock no longer tried to hide from his true feelings, his love. He had gone through a tortuous process to get to where he was today. The man who had fled in terror to Gol was a stranger to him now, an alien that just happened to bear his own face. And he knew, looking into the Captain's eyes, that without Kirk at his side, the journey would have been an impossible one. Indeed, it was Kirk who was the catalyst, who kept gently pointing him in the right direction when he was making another disastrous mistake.

Spock's fingers traced out the circular pattern of the medallion on his neck. The Captain had found the right moment to give the IDIC to him after all. When they had first met he was as stiff an unemotional as one of the bulkheads on the Enterprise. Three weeks ago he had told his father, in a Federation council chamber, that he was happy. Full circle indeed.

He remembered how he had stood, his own words ringing in his ears, and watched Sarek leave the room. When he turned back to face the silent chamber, Kirk was the only person who remained. The Captain stood, silently, patiently, waiting for him. Just as Spock knew he would be. They had left the room together, walking shoulder to shoulder. As always.

Infinite Diversity. When it came right down to it, it was about love. Nothing more. The IDIC did, in a way, represent the full circle they had traveled in their lives together. With one very fundamental difference -- the words, the concept applied to *him* now. He had taken it to heart in a way that would have been impossible two decades ago. He accepted his love for Kirk, accepted and cherished it just as he would cherish the necklace that symbolized what it was all about.

And that, after all, was the most important difference of all.

"You like it, huh?"

Spock's reply was barely audible. "Yes, Jim..."

Kirk grinned. "Good. Then I'm going to fix a midnight snack. I'm damned near starved. Aren't you hungry yet?"

Spock gave him a teasing look, understanding Kirk's attempt to lighten the mood.

"Yes, the hell I am."



MOMENT

by Beverly Volker

The little boy looked out the window, his hazel eyes full of hope. Quietly, his mother entered the room, reluctant to intrude, to turn that hope into disappointment, especially on this day. Her voice was gentle, with a note of resolution.

"Come away from the window, honey. Come into the other room and show your aunt and uncle how your new toys work."

The child was not ready to admit defeat. "But he still might come. I asked Santa to bring my Daddy home on Christmas."

The woman made her voice deliberately firm. "I told you that was unrealistic. Your father can't come home - on Christmas or any other time. You're just going to have to accept that." She softened her tone, coaxing. "Come on. Don't be sad. You got so many nice new toys from Santa."

He would not be placated, his bottom lip turned down in a pout as he absently brushed aside a stray lock of hair. "But why *can't* he come home, Mother? Where is he? *Who* is he?"

Carol sighed, exasperated by the child's persistence. He was growing too fast, too bright. "David, this is not the time to discuss it. I've told you, I'll explain it all to you someday -- when you're older, when the time is right. Why can't you just leave it at that? I take care of you; I see that you have everything you need or want. Why can't you be satisfied with just me?"

David reached up to put his arms around his mother's neck. "I'm sorry. I love you. I'll go play with my new toys."

Carol smiled thinly, hugging her son. She shoved down the stab of guilt and put out of her mind the man who was so like his child...

The young captain gazed out the large window on the observation deck, his sad eyes full of wonder. Quietly, his Vulcan First Officer entered the room, reluctant to intrude, yet sensing a duty, a need, to be with his new-found friend. His deep timbred voice was gentle with a hint of a question.

"You seemed troubled tonight at the party, Captain."

Kirk turned, touched by the perceptiveness of this man who came from a supposedly unfeeling race. He smiled. "Just a touch of the Christmas melancholies, I guess, Spock. I wanted to get away by myself for a few minutes."

Spock started to back away. "Forgive me. I'm intruding."

"No, no. Not at all," Kirk shook his head. "It was the party -- all that merriment, dancing, drinking. It suddenly got to me... "

Spock was perplexed. "It was my understanding that Christmas is a time for merry-making for humans."

"You're right, it is." Kirk tried to explain. "But it's also a time for reflection, a time for home and family and... children." Kirk turned back to the stars. "I was thinking about a child -- a little boy -- let's see, four years old now. I guess I was just... wondering how he was spending his Christmas. " Spock's silence seemed to drive him on to voice the hurt to someone he knew instinctively would understand. "I've only seen him once. His mother asked me not to... and she's probably right. But at Christmas... well, I just... think and...wish... Anyway, all this celebrating seemed somehow shallow." He shrugged, not sure he understood himself what he was feeling.

Spock moved to Kirk's side, gazing out at the same stars. "If I correctly understand your holiday, the gaiety and celebrating are a part of it, but it is in the awesome peacefulness of a place like this that one will find true meaning." He turned to face his Captain. "Perhaps someday you will be able to explain that to the child."

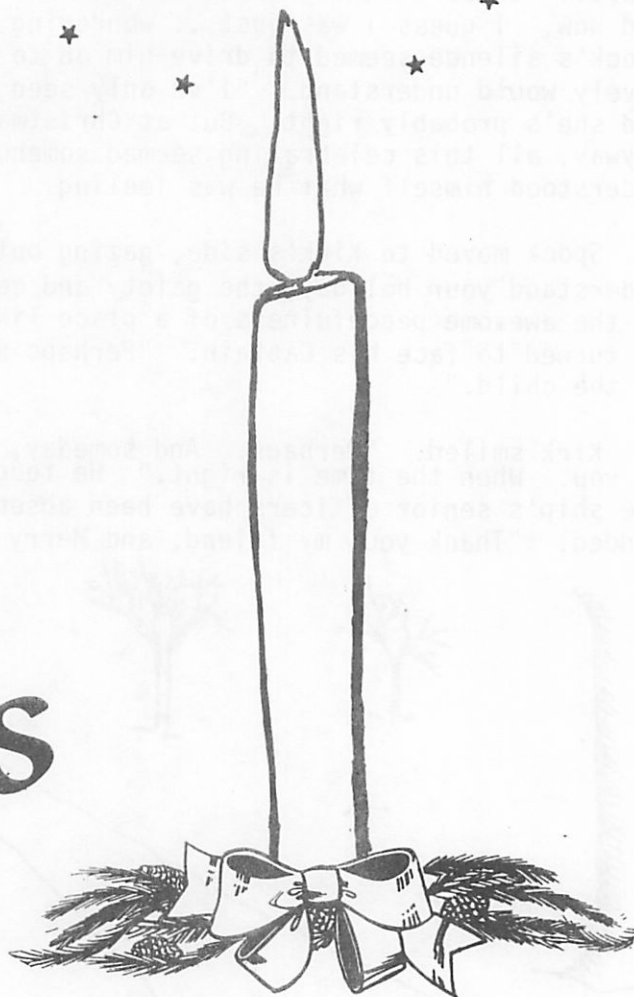
Kirk smiled. "Perhaps. And someday, Mr. Spock, I will explain all about him to you. When the time is right." He touched the Vulcan's arm. "Now, I think the ship's senior officers have been absent from the party for too long." Spock nodded. "Thank you, my friend, and Merry Christmas."



MEMORIES

by Ginna LaCroix

art by Jan Davies



"You are not at the party."

Kirk looked up at Spock who had stopped on the platform surrounding the bridge. "I was," he said quietly. "I couldn't take it."

An eyebrow slowly rose. "I did not realize attending a Christmas party was considered a difficult duty."

Kirk smiled ruefully as he got up from the command chair. "It's not," he admitted. He walked to the navigator's station and switched on the viewscreen so the star pattern shimmered to life in front of them. "It's the memories," he said softly.

"This time of year does appear to bring a certain sadness," Spock commented as he stepped down to the level where Kirk was standing.

Kirk nodded. "Even when the memories are good ones." He turned and looked at Spock. "Not very logical, is it?"

"No," Spock answered, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"How did you know where I'd gone?" Kirk asked. "I didn't think anyone had noticed I'd left, and the bridge on third shift isn't exactly populated."

Spock looked around the darkened bridge. The few crewmembers who were not attending the large Christmas party had been assigned to third shift, and the ship's essential controls were being run from auxiliary control. He finally brought his attention back to Kirk. "I have discovered over the years that when you appear to be nowhere else at odd times, I can usually find you here."

"Unpredictable Humans, huh?"

"In some ways." Spock folded his arms. "What is troubling you, Jim?" There was a hint of worry in the deep voice.

Their eyes held for a time, then Kirk took a deep breath. "I'm not sure." He turned back to the star field. "When I was at the party, I suddenly started to remember other parties over the years... the ones we shared, and the ones we didn't ... " His voice caught for a second, and his hand tightened on the arm of the center seat. "I panicked, Spock. I had to get out... I needed to be alone." He glanced over his shoulder to see Spock's dark eyes fixed on him, silently offering his support, even if he did not fully understand the reason why that support was needed.

"I, too, found myself remembering past occasions," Spock said slowly.

"Like our first Christmas?" Kirk asked, an impish grin crossing his face. "I gave you, or at least I tried to give you..." He shook his head. "What a mess that was!"

"Not at all," Spock countered. "I was the one who made it difficult. I prided myself on being Vulcan, and frowned on all those things Humans felt were important."

"And I turned up with that silly gift," Kirk said, "determined that you should join in our celebration." He turned and looked at Spock. "Even though you thanked me, I was never sure you had opened it..."

"Well, Captain," Mark Piper exclaimed as they walked down the corridor together, "this is shaping up to be one wingding of a party!"

Kirk grinned. "That's one thing I learned from Captain Garrovick. If you expect your crew to work hard, you've got to let them play hard."

Piper laughed. "If they keep playing this hard, I'm not sure I'm going to have enough beds in sickbay to hold the overflow -- if you'll excuse the pun," he added.

"Tonight, yes, but don't push it tomorrow," Kirk replied. He hesitated for a minute. "Have you seen Spock anywhere? He seems to have disappeared completely."

Piper looked at him for a minute. "I hope you're not expecting him to attend the festivities."

Kirk looked momentarily downcast. "Well, I thought maybe..."

Piper shook his head. "Vulcans don't go in for such things, Captain. Parties are frivolous, and frivolity is frowned upon by your Science Officer."

"I suppose," Kirk responded, but he didn't sound entirely convinced. "Well, I'd better go check up on the ship. I know someone must be on duty, but from all the revellers I've seen, I'm darned if I know who. See you later."

"If I'm still standing," Piper said with a chuckle.

As Kirk passed through the ship, he began to understand what the term 'skeleton crew' really meant. All important stations were manned -- just -- but each one by an experienced member of the crew. They did not appear perturbed that they were missing out on the fun, and seemed to enjoy the time that Kirk spent with each of them. Little did Kirk know how much higher each man's morale had been lifted because their commanding officer was willing to forego the excitement to personally acknowledge each man's commitment.

Only one small light was burning in Science Lab 3. Spock was so intent in his work that he didn't immediately notice Kirk's arrival.

"Finding the cure for Bysindian Blood Burn, Mr. Spock?" Kirk asked eventually.

Spock finally looked up. Kirk did not realize the Vulcan's silence was covering his surprise at his Captain's unexpected appearance. "That is Dr. Piper's area of expertise, Captain," he said.

"Jim," Kirk corrected. "We're alone and it's Christmas, Spock. Friends aren't normally quite so formal on such occasions."

"No," Spock agreed. "Humans are usually rowdy and drunk."

Kirk stared at him until Spock's eyes dropped. He had said the first rash thing that had come to his mind to cover the fact that Kirk's use of

the word 'friend' had unsettled him, and he knew instantly that it had been the wrong thing to say.

"Well," Kirk said as he reached out to activate the central lighting, "I'm neither rowdy, nor drunk, at least not yet," he added with a small smile. He walked across the room and stopped in front of the Vulcan. "I know social gatherings such as the one raging now make you uncomfortable, even though I've bugged you over the last few days to unbend a little. Still, I didn't want you to feel left out..." He fished around in his pocket, finally bringing out a small package that was wrapped in gaily colored paper. "Merry Christmas," he said softly, holding the package out to the Vulcan.

Spock looked at it for a moment, then looked back at Kirk, but made no effort to take the package from him. "I do not understand why you take a day set aside to honor the birth of a deity so many in the galaxy revere, and turn it into a gaudy show of gift exchanging..."

Kirk's gaze never wavered, but his hand dropped. "You can't mean that, Spock," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

"I am different from you," Spock answered, returning his attention to his interrupted work.

Spock's voice clearly said that the conversation was over. Kirk stood in silence for a few moments, then set the small package down on the table. "Merry Christmas anyway," he said softly, then turned and left, not knowing that Spock's eyes followed him out of the room.

Spock sat in silence for a while, then he turned his attention back to his project. But he found that he could no longer concentrate. The small package sat in his line of vision and it gradually became a major distraction.

He finally put down his stylus in frustration. Why wouldn't Kirk just leave him alone as all his previous commanding officers had done? No one else had ever cared if Spock joined in or not, yet Kirk always made an effort to see that the Vulcan was included in everything.

Spock reached out and picked up the box. He found himself carefully opening the brightly colored wrapping, being very careful not to tear it, just as he had been so careful when he had been a small child opening the presents his mother had wrapped for him.

He put aside the paper and opened the velvet box. He sat for a long time looking at its contents, then closed the box and stared at the closed door, his thoughts far away...

"I did, after you had left," Spock admitted, looking somewhat uncomfortable. "I was embarrassed that I had not thought to get you anything." He smiled slightly. "I had never owned a simple compass before. I still have it." He fell silent for a minute, his eyes on the starfield, then he looked back at Kirk. "I still don't think you realize how much more you gave me that first Christmas. Your present in itself was symbolic, but not nearly as important. You gave me understanding, something I had never had before in my life and, beyond that, I found acceptance. As this time passes on the calendar each year, I remember those two precious gifts... gifts you had no idea that you gave, and more precious because they were given freely, with no qualifications, no pressure to reciprocate."

Spock fell silent, then moved to the railing that surrounded the bridge, finally turning back to Kirk, his face serious. "That last Christmas of our mission... "

"You mean the end of our first five years?"

Spock nodded. "Yes," he said softly.

"That was a 'present' I'll never forget," Kirk said. "You... "

"It wasn't intentional -- the hurt... "

Kirk turned away, unable to look at Spock. "I drove you away, I know that now, but I was so tired then... I needed so much..." He glanced back at Spock. "The fact that it was Christmas day didn't make it any easier." He drew in a deep breath. "I remember walking through the streets for hours. There was joy everywhere, and my heart was in little fragments. I had just had another big fight with McCoy. It was my fault... I had to lash out at someone, and he happened to be handy..."

"Damnit, McCoy, you're not my mother!" Kirk said, holding onto his temper by a thin thread.

"You're damned right, I'm not!" McCoy shot back. "I wouldn't be caught dead being responsible for an idiot like you! Spock's the only one who would put up with..."

"Leave him out of this," Kirk said in an icy voice. "Spock's not here. He's out of our lives.. "

"Bullshit!" McCoy retorted. "Your lives revolve around each other! And now you have the nerve to stand here and refuse to do anything to get him back!"

"He doesn't want me around, Doctor. He made that very clear, and I'm damned if I'm going to crawl to get him back."

"You're a pig-headed fool if you don't."

Kirk stood in stoney silence staring at McCoy. How often in the past few days had they ended up like this? He couldn't remember, and suddenly he was sick of the whole thing. In the space of a week he had lost the Enterprise, lost the freedom of space -- and he had lost Spock. His five year mission had ended, and so had his life.

"Fine," he said eventually, "you go crawling if you want. I'm joining the Admiralty."

"Jim!" McCoy started, but Kirk was gone, only the soft swish of the closing doors acknowledging the fact that he had been there.

"Fine, 'Admiral,' fine," McCoy muttered to the empty air. "You go ahead and join that august body. I quit! I wanted to be a hermit before I met you and, by damn, I'm going to become one now!"

Kirk stormed out of Starfleet Headquarters and headed into the heart of San Francisco. The air was bitter, but his anger kept him warm as his feet continued to pound the pavement, but at an ever slower pace until he gradually became aware of his surroundings.

Bright lights were everywhere and people were gathered in laughing groups as they made their way past him. A group of carollers were standing on the corner, their voices raised in praise of the season.

It was Christmas day, and he was more alone than he'd ever been in his life...

Kirk looked down for a few minutes, then he turned to Spock. "I finally walked out to the bay. It was quiet there, and you could almost see the stars." His voice grew very soft. "I tried to find the Enterprise. I even tried to find Vulcan, but the lights of the city were too bright and I couldn't see anything clearly." His hand went to the back of the chair. "So I cried," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

Spock stood silent. He could give no answer. The pain of that time had long since disappeared, but the knife could still come out of nowhere. And it was the first time Kirk had ever admitted to Spock that he had cried.

"The next Christmas we shared was better," Kirk said after a minute, a smile starting to appear on his face.

Spock stared at him for a minute, then realized that Kirk wanted to change the subject. "That occasion, Captain, turned into a most unsober affair," he stated, willing to follow Kirk's lead.

"You mean we all got soused."

"You did," Spock said with dignity. "I did not."

Kirk grinned wickedly. "You came close... "

Kirk giggled as he collapsed into Scotty's arms. "It'd never work, Scotty," he said, trying to catch his breath. "He'd know..."

"Ach, Captain, how could a non-drinking Vulcan ken what 300-year-old Scotch would do to his system?"

"Come on, Jim, we've never seen him drunk," McCoy protested. "What better time than now?"

"Bones," Kirk said as he attempted to straighten up, "you have tinsel in your hair!"

"Well, you've got mistletoe in yours," McCoy retorted.

Kirk giggled again. "I think I'm drunk," he finally stated.

"You most certainly are," McCoy said with a broad smile. "About time, too. None of us had time to let off steam since we routed V'ger and you stuck your tongue out at Nogura."

"Aye," Scotty said. "I thought for sure you were going to be busted to ensign..."

"Probably would have except we left at warp 10 with communications still open," Kirk said.

"My hand slipped," Scotty said innocently.

A loud hiccup announced Sulu's arrival. He was draped around Uhura's shoulders. "I found him trying to walk through a bulkhead," she said with a smile. "Chekov was with him, but he had already passed out on the floor."

"I keep telling him Russians canna hold their vodka," Scotty snorted.

"Uhura!" A strangled protest from Kirk went unheeded as the communications officer suddenly wrapped her arms around him and swept him down into a heartfelt kiss. However, she wasn't much more sober than Kirk, and the two of them ended up in a tangle on the floor.

"Must be the mistletoe," McCoy muttered. "Everyone knows I have more appeal..."

Uhura was convulsed with laughter. "Sorry, sir," she gasped. "I meant to sweep you off your feet, but not quite like this!"

"I don't believe you dropped me for him," Sulu protested as he tried to get up from the floor, but was unsuccessful.

"Quite literally," McCoy observed.

"Hey, everyone," Kirk said, drawing up his knees to his chest and hugging them, "as long as you're here, you might as well know. We're going to get Spock drunk."

"No!" Uhura said with a throaty laugh.

"It's not possible," Sulu said. "Is it?"

They all looked at McCoy. "Well, is it?" Kirk demanded.

"His chemistry might be based on copper, but blood is blood," McCoy snorted, "and alcohol will play just as much havoc with his system as it does with ours."

"That settles it," Kirk said. "Let's go get him!" He got up rather unsteadily, then helped Uhura to her feet. "Remind me to give you some lessons in the proper way to sweep a man off his feet," he said gallantly.

"I'll look forward to it, Captain."

"Hey," Sulu protested as they started to file out, "don't forget me!"

"Sorry, Sulu," Kirk called back. "Uhura's more my type! Besides, we have a sacred mission to perform. Lead on, Scotty..." Their laughter slowly disappeared down the corridor as Sulu quietly curled up for some much needed sleep...

"I was fully aware that Mr. Scott had delved into his private stock," I simply poured my share into one of Mr. Sulu's potted plants."

"So that's what happened to it!" Kirk exclaimed. "Sulu moaned for weeks about its condition. He said he'd never seen a plant get sick so quickly, and for no apparent reason. It took weeks for it to recover."

"And you wondered why you had a headache for the same length of time..." Spock observed drily.

"I remember how smug you were, too," Kirk said. "You didn't win any popularity contests for that, Mister."

"I doubt if anyone really harbored any ill will, Jim, toward themselves or anyone else."

Kirk grinned again. "Yeah, we were together again, together in a way we'd never been before, and our life was ahead of us. We thought no one could ever take that away again..."

"But they did," Spock said quietly, "and that following Christmas was one of the bleakest we have ever shared." Spock walked forward and leaned against the edge of the navigation console. "I have never asked you why..."

"Why I left?"

Spock nodded. "It wasn't the reason you gave -- the cadet program..."

Kirk shook his head. "No, no it wasn't, at least not directly. It was something that had been building for a long time. I think that last Christmas day brought it to a head." He turned away and looked at the command chair. "It was..." He fell silent for a moment, then tried again. "It was after Alpha Centaur..."

Spock finished reading the orders, then looked up at Kirk. "There appears to be no choice."

Kirk walked to the other side of the briefing room and stood looking at the blank viewscreen. "No," he said eventually, "there isn't."

"Jim, Alpha Centaur is the Klingon's last refuge. If the Federation frees this last planet, the Klingons will be forced to move back into their own territory, and the status quo will be restored."

Kirk turned to look at Spock. "And they must be driven back."

Spock stared at him. "Jim, what is it?"

Kirk ran his hand through his hair. "Do you know what the average age of Tonlan's security force is?"

"Twenty-two point three," Spock replied promptly, causing Kirk to look at him sharply. "I, too, know what is to come," Spock said softly.

"And there's no way we can stop it," Kirk said, once again turning away from the Vulcan.

"They are well trained," Spock started.

"But not tested," Kirk countered. "They don't know how to defend themselves, not the dirty gutter type of fighting that would allow them to survive -- that will allow the Klingons to survive. You know it, and I know it..." his voice faded away.



"Jim, the Federation must survive. Starfleet service is not the safest profession, but it is one of the most noble. In order for the majority to be safe, some must be willing to risk everything."

"Maybe that's the problem," Kirk said slowly as he sat down at the briefing table. "I can see the outcome affecting other people, but never me. I always seem to walk a safe, middle road... "

"Hardly safe," Spock said, a touch of irony in his voice.

"With a guardian angel like you by my side, how can I be anything else?" Kirk said with a small smile. The flashing siren of red alert broke into their conversation. "Come on," Kirk said, "we've got a battle to win!" Gone was the hesitation -- once again the confident commander was ready to lead his men into battle, into a hell none of them had ever faced before in their lives...

"There was too much death there, both on our side ... and theirs," Spock said.

Kirk nodded. "Do you know what I was doing the next day -- Christmas day -- while everybody else was celebrating?" Kirk asked, turning back to Spock.

The Vulcan shook his head.

"I was contacting the families of all those who had died. Regulations state it must be done within forty-eight hours. Do you have any idea of how many celebrations I destroyed... how many times my soul was cursed to eternal damnation? Something snapped, Spock. I've never felt like that before or since. Suddenly death stood up and laughed me in the face, and I stepped back. I'd never done that before, and I didn't know what to do. So I quit... "

"Temporarily."

Kirk smiled. "You knew me better than I knew myself."

"Which brings us back to today -- now," Spock said, "and they are celebrating down there, and we are here."

Kirk looked at him in silence for a long time. "Too much has happened since last year," he said finally. "Do you have any idea what that much stress can do to a man?"

"Try dying..."

Kirk stood silent for a moment, not quite believing his ears, then he burst out laughing. "You won't let me feel sorry for myself, will you?"

"There is nothing to feel sorry about."

Kirk glanced back at the fleeting stars. "You're right. We've been to Khan's hell and back again..."

"And proved we were the stronger," Spock said quietly.

Kirk glanced at him. "Yes, but we're stronger because we have each other." He drew in a deep breath. "Thank god for shock. I watched you die...I knew you were dead, yet it all seems a blur..."

"The mind heals itself," Spock said softly. "Mine did... after some encouragement from you."

"It wasn't very gentle," Kirk said, a rueful grin on his face. "I'm still sorry I yelled at you, but I had tried everything else."

"There is no need to feel remorse," Spock answered. "It turned the key in my locked memory. I knew again who I was and, more importantly, who you were, and what you meant to me."

Kirk smiled at the soft light in Spock's eyes. He knew he would never again take Spock for granted. They had both faced death, and somehow managed to overcome it, but Kirk knew either of them could be taken in the blink of a moment, and this time all that would be left were the memories. But for now they were together, their lives joined more now than they'd ever been, and nothing -- and no one -- could ever take away the reality of that from them.

"Come on, Spock," he said, clapping a hand on Spock's shoulder, "somebody's bound to miss us soon... "

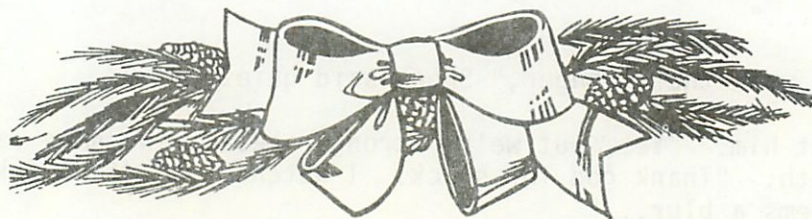
A small smile touched Spock's face. His mission had been accomplished. Kirk had needed him and he had come. Now, as one, they would again face the world. As the turbolift doors slid shut behind them, the star-filled blackness of space kept watch over the silent speeding ship and the men within her, the universe, at least for a short time, at one with them.

So have yourself a

MERRY little CHRISTMAS

now

The Volkers and
The Kippax



OUR APOLOGIES...

We know it was a long wait for CONTACT CHRISTMAS #2 -- it was a long haul for us, too. A series of delays, problems, crises both personal and professional, kept this issue from getting to you as expected.

Despite the wait, we sincerely hope you enjoy our monster and accept our heartfelt apologies for any inconvenience caused by the delay. We thank you for your support and patience.

Best
and
Nancy